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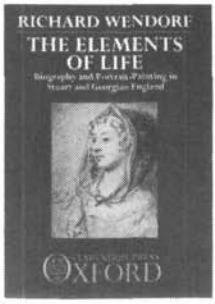

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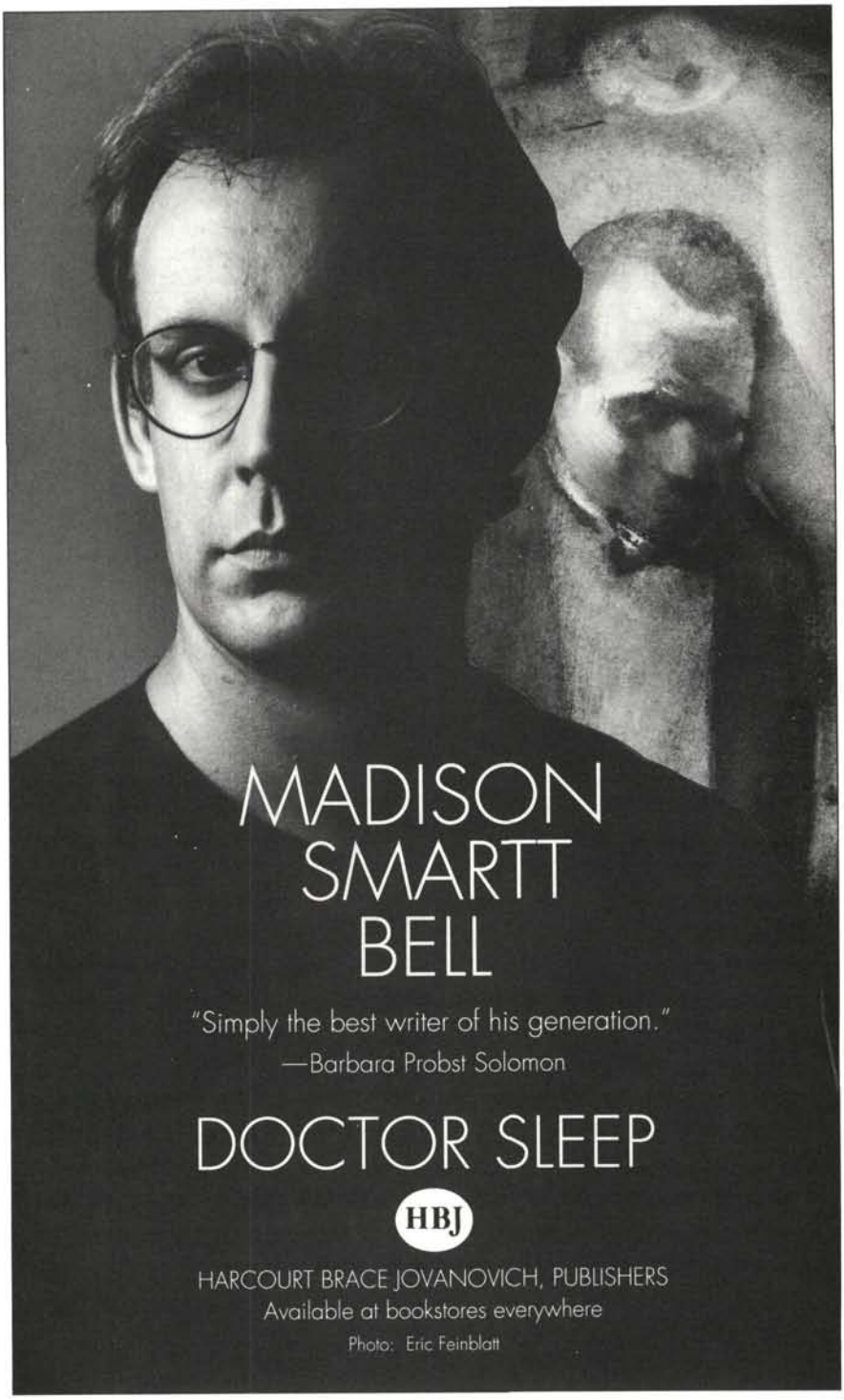

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A magazine of literature and the arts

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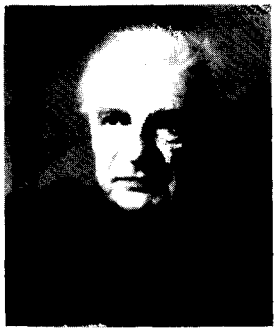

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JOSEPH EPSTEIN

The Academic Zoo: Theory—in Practice

> We have witnessed what amounts to a cultural revolution, comparable to the one in China if not worse, and whereas the Chinese have to some extent overcome their cultural revolution, I see many signs that ours is getting worse all the time, and no indication that it will be overcome in the forseeable future."
>
> —Paul Oskar Kristeller,
> "A Life of Learning"

"It's not what I had in mind," said my friend, eight, nine, maybe it was even ten years ago. He had just returned from a Modern Language Association meeting in Houston, which he described in what for him was scarifying detail: Marxists, professional lesbians, obscurantists were all over the joint—they appeared not only to be in charge but to give the meeting, and hence the occupation of teaching literature, its character. "It's not what I had in mind," he repeated, wistfully, without irony or anger. He had studied at Columbia toward the close of its glory days, under men of the intellectual quality and urbanity of Lionel Trilling and Jacques Barzun. Columbia, in the days of his graduate study there, retained an unmistakable and immensely impressive metropolitan spirit, which years afterwards still clung to my friend, who taught in a suit and wore a serious hat. But what had once seemed the apogee of the "profession," as university teachers of literature had come to refer to themselves in their collectivity, was now clearly its anomaly. Then in his late thirties, my friend, with his metropolitan spirit and Arnoldian notions about literary culture, was a young fogey, already a dinosaur. Most distinctly, it was not what he had in mind.

What had I in mind when I began teaching in the English department at Northwestern University in 1974 at the age of thirty-seven? As someone who had never gone to graduate school, my expectations were much less precise than those of my friend. I had been a student of English myself as an

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undergraduate and the preponderance of contributors to the intellectual and literary magazines which had been so important a part of my education had themselves made their living teaching in English departments. I had been around enough not to expect Barzunian-Trillingesque suavity ("Ah, how did Wystan put it just the other evening . . ."), but I did expect adults for colleagues. It turned out to be not quite so. In 1974 the great period of student unrest (still one of my favorite euphemisms) may have been over in fact but it was far from dead in spirit. Youngish professors, which in academic life had come to mean anyone under sixty, now dressed and generally comported themselves like students. Beards and denim was the dress code for pedagogues, and fornication with one's undergraduate students was for many taken as a prequisite of the job (the pay, after all, wasn't that good). In the hall of the building in which I had my office, I would often hear a teacher address an undergraduate by his first name and then hear the student return the compliment. It all felt like Lord of the freakin' Flies.

But other things were cooking at the same time. One was a new tolerance for the absurd. For a while Northwestern had become the location of the summer School of Criticism and Theory, which at a vastly reduced intellectual level had become a replacement of sorts for the old Kenyon and then Indiana School of Letters. Such schools, institutes, centers (for things on the periphery) have never been my idea of a good time, and I generally steer clear of them. But I happened to see a notice that the Harvard philospher Stanley Cavell was to give a lecture on the Howard Hawkes movie *His Girl Friday*, and, since I had been reading Professor Cavell for years, without either fun or intellectual profit, I thought I would drop around to see if he was any better in person. He wasn't, and in the flesh he was able to add pomposity to the oblique sententiousness I had already found so unprepossessing on the page. Yet I was astonished by the rapt reception his almost passionately boring, nearly frame-by-frame analysis of a delightfully lightweight little movie received on the part of graduate students and teachers in the standing-room-only audience. Professor Cavell ran past the normal lecturer's hour, which is probably longer than Ben Hecht and Charles Lederer spent on composing the screenplay for the movie but which to me felt like a bad fiscal quarter. I was

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the only one to leave the room at hour's end. The rest of the crowd remained, slack-jawed and agog, no doubt making innumerable intellectual discoveries that were clearly not available to me. This was the first but it would not be the last time that people putatively interested in the same things I was interested in would discover treasure where I found none buried.

Assembling these recollections, I recall, too, that I have been teaching just long enough to have been on the scene to witness a black woman denied tenure in an English department—my own at Northwestern. The scholarship of the woman in question was judged undistinguished, even drab, and her performance as a teacher wanting. The decision was not made without some nervousness—the fear of being accused of racism was already one of the leading social terrors of our time—but it was made. As an untenured member of the faculty, I was not in on the decision and so cannot say whether it was a just one. What I can say with some assurance, however, is that for a similar decision to be made today the woman would have had to set fire to at least a simple majority of all the university's trustees.

The hunt for minority group members—"minorities," they are rather barbarously called—to fill academic jobs has of course been on in earnest for some while now, owing not only to affirmative action laws but also, my guess is, to the desire on the part of most university teachers to do Spike Lee's "right thing." That the right thing isn't generally the correct thing from the standpoint of maintaining academic standards is not something that many academics who make these decisions wish to dwell upon. They say instead that minority students need "role models," that past injustices must be redressed, that different, even disparate views are much needed. As for the question of standards, well, they will tell you, if one is going to introduce standards into the discussion of who is fit to teach what, then the game really is up.

The notion that a multiplicity of points of view is a felicitous condition to which to aspire is one with a long and rather dreary history behind it. At least in part it stems from the bad academic historical conscience owing to the anti-Semitism of university English and philosophy departments that was regnant until well past World War II. When the generation of the

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sixties began to come into academic power—and it is a bit shocking to realize that the dopester, headband-wearing, war-protesting graduate student who was twenty-five in 1965 is fifty-one today—the members of this generation not only wished to eliminate the old waspocracy, but tended to go about it in rather a crude way. I noted the crudity of it a number of years ago when I gave a lecture at Denison University, a school in the fastness of Ohio for the children of the upper-middle class who must have had rather lower-middle class SAT scores. At Denison I noted an altogether too tidy distribution of English department personnel: two blacks, one feminist, a homosexual, a Jew, and a bedraggled woman who was described to me as being "from the sixties," as if the decade were a country, like the Ukraine. When I returned from my visit to Denison I wrote to the chairman of the department, who was absent during my visit, asking why they weren't able to get a better Jew. Odd but he never answered.

The notion of a multiplicity of points of view was from the start more than a bit disingenuous. What was actually wanted all along was a multiplicity of left-wing points of view. It is only in the strange land of university humanities departments that Marxism—so heinous in dealing with people, so happy in dealing with texts—continues to find proponents. But then the university culture has never been known to let itself be put off or otherwise inconvenienced by reality. Nor put out by hypocrisy. To take a particular case, with all the great administrative passion to hire black professors, a man named Shelby Steele, a contributor to *Harper's*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Commentary*, and *The American Scholar*, a university professor who is black and not afraid to examine the assumptions behind current black social psychology and political behavior, languishes in the English department of San Jose State University. Why isn't this man working up the road at Stanford, or across the country at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, or at Duke, Brown, or some other fashionable educational spas? *Engagé* and *enragé* is the way the better schools prefer their blacks and Professor Steele, poor chap, fails to qualify.

"All right, we are two nations," wrote John Dos Passos at the close of *U.S.A.*, by which he meant that he found the America of that day divided between rich and poor, executioners and

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victims, haves and have-nots. But when I think of his remark today I think, Yes, we are two nations: one made up of people who live within the university and the other made up of the rest of the country. Something very detached, remote, unreal there is about life in a contemporary university. More is entailed than the stale metaphor ivory tower can hope to convey. Standards of acceptable conduct, speech, humor, rationality are so different in the university than in the remainder of American life that, for one who travels back and forth between the two, as I do as a part-time university teacher, perspective at times becomes exceedingly difficult to maintain. Sometimes the university seems to me a comic zoo, filled with mildly deformed and largely disappointed bipeds; sometimes it seems a madhouse in which it is the staff (the faculty) and not the inmates (the students) which is insane; and sometimes it seems a strange collection of small businessmen, each trying to hammer out a living in a line of work where the rewards—of capital, of ego—are so skimpy that there is too little to go round, a condition that encourages very unpleasant behavior. Old-fashioned phrases to describe university faculties such as a "community of scholars" nowadays are not only drained of meaning but seem quite as oxymoronic as "a completely honest politician," "a good kosher meal," or "a reasonable feminist."

I don't mean to suggest that the fairly recent past was a prelapsarian period in which English departments were staffed exclusively by briliant critics, profound scholars, serenely dedicated teachers. English departments have always been generously studded by snobs, fools, stuffed shirts, dreary oneupsmen, dipsomaniacs, and thumping deadly bores. Yet I doubt that the atmosphere around English departments was ever quite so snarly as it is today. People in them walk about in a state of high cussedness—ticked, as the kids say, to the max—ready at all times to be offended. Touchy, touchy, touchy. The least miscue and they book you for sexism, racism, homophobia, sexual harassment. Heaven forfend you should refer to a department *chairman* rather than to the neutral and sillily elliptical *chair*, or say "Negro" (instead of black or African-American or whatever is the O.K. nomenclature of the week), or enunciate an unacceptable political opinion—and you are

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done for, morally cashiered, banished forever from the land of the enlightened and virtuous.

All this might be entirely comical—it's still pretty damn ridiculous—if it didn't have real intellectual consequences. Life without a sense of humor, which is life as it tends to be lived in the contemporary university, is life without any sense of proportion or perspective. Where laughter has been abrogated, so has common sense, which is why much in current English department studies seems, not to put too fine a point on it, quite nuts. Thus I not long ago read a batch of student papers in which I learned that "English is a language of imposition for African-Americans, a language of slavery and domination"; that "Shakespeare and [Robert] Coover [what a jolly pairing!] are both products and propagators of a male-dominated capitalistic society and both use their mastery of rhetoric to reinforce the status quo"; and that Joseph Conrad, benighted fellow, shows "ethnocentric androgenism," which goes a long way toward explaining that Mr. Kurtz's problem, in "Heart of Darkness," is apparently that he failed to acculturate sufficiently with the tribesmen he met up with in the Congo. "You don't like my brother," an old joke about cannibalism has it, "at least eat the noodles."

Given the atmosphere of endemic touchiness, which has gone a long way toward eliminating any sense of humor and with it the sense of proportion and perspective, it follows that every intellectual tendency in current academic life must be taken all the way out. In the contemporary university, there is every chance that the wildest possibility will eventually come about. Given time and the temerity of the goofy with tenure, the current interest in animal rights among certain academics figures one day to issue in a defense of bestiality, not to speak of many papers with titles like "Bambi Under Late Capitalism," and before long English departments will be running ads in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (the *Pravda* of academic life), seeking a moose who can teach the Romantics ("We Are An Equal Species Employer"). I exaggerate, perhaps; but I wouldn't bet against the future existence of those papers on Bambi.

Although some of the zaniness I have been recounting has shown up in various forms throughout the humanities and in

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the softer social sciences, it has hit departments of English and Romance languages particularly hard. Why this should be so is a question calling for a complicated answer, or answers. My own would begin with the recognition that not so long ago English and comparative literature departments in America seemed to harbor some of the more interesting minds in universities. Erich Auerbach, R. P. Blackmur, Cleanth Brooks, Kenneth Burke, John Crowe Ransom, I. A. Richards, Allen Tate, Lionel Trilling, Robert Penn Warren, René Wellek, Yvor Winters, and a good many others found work in them. (F. R. Leavis and William Empson, in England, ought to be added to their number.) These were not original thinkers, or even (with the exception of Auerbach) great scholars, but they did have an indisputable seriousness about them that was impressive in their own day and seems no less so in ours. Cumulatively, they lent a dignity to the study of literature that guaranteed that considerations of literary matters would not fall below a certain level of seriousness.

This impressive academic cadre was never replaced. Or at any rate the great names in academic literary study that succeeded them were of a different sort. Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom, George Steiner, Paul de Man, Fredric Jameson were more European-minded, ambitious on behalf of criticism, extravagant in their intellectual pretensions. They at once enlarged the scope of literary study and somehow at the same time managed to drain it of its gravity. Cumulatively, they stood for little. Each critic seemed to be pretty much in business for himself. A critic of their own generation wrote a book whose title might have stood in as the motto for them all: The Performing Self. They could be brilliant, they were often obscure, they were intellectually unattractive, they stood for nothing, with the exception of Fredric Jameson, who was a highly paid Marxist at tobacco-rich Duke University (talk about what Marx himself called "the objective contradictions of capitalism").

Yet the New Criticism of Brooks, Warren, & Co. gave way as easily as it did to this newer, flashier, partially imported (from France) criticism quite as much for industrial as for intellectual reasons. Careful, close readings of literary works, chiefly poems, which was the specialty of the New Criticism, would always

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be an integral part of literary training, though it soon became unfashionable to acknowledge this fact while the New Criticism was under attack. Perhaps the New Criticism could have been more historical or biographical than it generally was—though it was never quite so bereft of history or biography as its attackers claimed. Perhaps there was a conservative bias to the New Critical method of reading literature. But the real problem was not that the methods of the New Criticism were useless as that they seemed used up. The literary landscape had been picked clean by them. Could one really bear yet another close reading of yet another poem by John Donne or William Blake? Did the world truly need another explanation of any of Kafka's stories or novels? The people forced to write such stuff—for tenure, for promotion, for self-justification—must have been bored blue. Let us not speak of those asked to read it.

And so the time had come, as they used to say on "The Monty Python Show," for something completely different. In a careful, rather arid, considerably tendentious study of the development of the teaching and study of literature in American universities,[1] Gerald Graff has shown that there has been a series of intramural conflicts within English departments almost from the beginning. There had been the conflicts between the belle-lettrists and the philologists, between the philologists and the generalists, between the generalists and the literary historians, between the literary historians and the New Critics, between the New Critics and the cultural critics. Generally these conflicts ended in compromise arrangements whereby there occurred a shift in the alignment of power and popularity of one or another method of teaching and study within particular departments and within the so-called "field" at large. Somehow the conflicts were never quite allowed to come into the open, though power had nonetheless shifted and the newer method had gained ascendancy. Business, though changed a bit here and there, went on pretty much as usual.

But beginning in the 1970s a much more radical program emerged. It was more radical in two distinct senses: first, it tended to be much more openly political than other program-

[1] PROFESSING LITERATURE: An Institutional History, by *Gerald Graff*. University of Chicago Press. $24.95; $11.95.

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matic attempts to alter the teaching and professional study of literature; and, second, its methods were a direct challenge not alone to literary criticism but to literature itself. Whereas other, earlier disputes within literature departments were about methodologies, about how literature could most profitably be studied, what was now being proposed was the quite original notion that literature was itself inherently false, corrupt, in need of destruction. I say "destruction," but the official word was of course "deconstruction," which as Alvin Kernan, in *The Death of Literature*,[2] notes has been "the covering term increasingly used for the broad range of literary criticism that discredited the old literature . . . and charged it with having been mystifying, illogical, and harmful rather than beneficial."

When it all began is a bit difficult to ascertain with precision. A large residue of resentment was left over from the revolution in the universities that never quite came off, and this resentment was reinforced by large reserves of contempt for life as lived outside the university (all those people who twice elected Ronald Reagan) and immediate sympathy for anyone who claimed victim status, both of which are among the chief legacies of the sixties. But perhaps the first significant bookish evidence of the new impulse to degrade literature came in 1970, with the publication of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, which revealed that certain writers—Norman Mailer and Henry Miller prominent among them—did not treat women very kindly in their novels. What came to be known as "gender studies" were on their way, and would get goofier and goofier with the passage of time, though doubtless my view of the matter is, as the academic feminists would put it, "phallocentric." A new generation of Marxists began to work the class angle, fortified with large draughts of Foucault and other Frenchmen, and also pitched in on the unending project of discovering literature, and especially American literature, shot through with racism. Complaint had become the heavy motif of criticism. Everywhere one encountered papers, courses, conferences devoted to gender, class, and race. "Gender, class, and race," announced a wag (me, actually), "gender, class, and race, stop your blubbering and wash your face."

[2] THE DEATH OF LITERATURE, by *Alvin Kernan*. Yale University Press. $22.50.

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Much of this new higher thinking seemed to originate from Yale. At Yale there was, more than a changing of the guard, a blowing up of the castle. Brooks, Warren, Wimsatt, Wellek out; Bloom, de Man, Hartman, Miller (J. Hillis) in. Randall Jarrell had long before warned that "critics are now so much better armed than they used to be in the old days; they've got tanks and flame throwers now, and it's harder to see past them to the work of art. . . ." To hear some of the Yale critics talk—Geoffrey Hartman, in particular—the work of criticism had all but supplanted the work of art. How could they get away with such extravagant pretensions? Alvin Kernan is not far off the money when he answers this question by writing: "The sharp decline in the quality of novels, poems, and plays of recent years offered an opportunity for the critic to gain some ground on the author, and the 'adversary culture's' attempt to seize power in the 1960s offered the occasion." Some of the Yale critics would later disavow the kind of criticism they had helped to usher in. Harold Bloom has called the hodgepodge of critical schools that emerged in the 1980s "the school of resentment" and "Foucault with soda water" and "a rabblement of lemmings." That last, "a rabblement of lemmings," is very good, but it probably oughtn't to be forgotten that Professor Bloom helped show them the way to the cliff.

I do not know what sound lemmings make, but you could almost hear the gurgle of delight that this newer criticism—which now began to go under the generic name of "theory"—gave to refugee professors from the land of the sixties and to the younger professoriat and to many graduate students. Here was a form of criticism that gave everyone who went in for it plenty of fresh work, and lots of it; all readings of literary works, theory had established for its adherents, were misreadings, and so criticism became a game that anyone could play. The major impulse of theory was suspicion, for it was interested above all in what is covert and what is absent from literary works, and as such it was chiefly concerned with tearing down not only the assumptions of earlier criticism but works of literature that this earlier criticism had raised up. In this regard theory gave that portion of the professoriat who came through the sixties unfulfilled, and those younger professors—women, ethnic minorities, homosexuals—who chose to squeeze all they

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could out of their self-created status of victimhood, a large and lovely outlet for their resentment. By attacking the works of the great writers, by arguing against the right of many of them to belong to the canon, they were able to attack the culture that had produced them, and to attack it at its roots. Under the regime of theory, the instability of language was often featured, and of course if one undermines the stability of language one is ultimately undermining meaning itself. Meaning, it had more than once been averred among the theory crowd, yes meaning, with its demands for order and its insistence on authority, was fascist.

I fear that I have made the adherents of "theory" seem more monolithic than perhaps they are. They in fact divide off into little groups, factions, schools, which go by the names of structuralists, speech-act theorists, reader-response critics, new historicists, and (most famously) deconstructionists; and to this partial roll call one can add feminists and (most recently) multiculturalists. In *Professing Literature*, Gerald Graff writes: "Theory is what is generated when some aspect of literature, its nature, its history, its place in society, its conditions of production and reception, its meaning in general, or the meanings of particular works, ceases to be given and becomes a question to be argued in a generalized way." In this reading, criticism would be about the meaning of literature and theory about the meaning of meaning. Graff may be correct when he says that what theorists have in common is an interest in "an inquiry into assumptions, premises, and legitimating principles and concepts." But this is not how theory has tended to work in practice, where it is usually more aggressive than Graff's comments suggest. "The stakes are enormous," the now dead Paul de Man is supposed to have told J. Hillis Miller, one of the original Yale brotherhood who has not given up on deconstruction and has himself remarked that "the violence and irrationality of the attacks on theory" have "now taken the strange form of the almost universal triumph of theory."

Just how "violent" and "irrational" have been the attacks on theory? One might have thought that this new, presumably radical work would have divided the world of literary studies, both at the level of the Modern Language Association and at that of the academic department. But it is not my sense that it

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did. For the most part, theory rather quickly won the day. Not that it made so many converts, for, apart from graduate students—who, sensing it was the hot thing, leading to jobs, went in for it in a big way—I don't think that it did. What happened instead is that most people teaching in literature departments went along with it. Some thought it would soon pass, and while it was here what did it matter if it didn't interfere with their own work. When I tried to get some of the grander names in English studies to write about the advent of theory for the magazine I edit, I found that many of them felt it was likely to be a fashion without much staying power; and, besides, none had the appetite for reading the vast amount of hideous prose required to do the job. Others felt that not only was it not worth fighting theory but that it might be a bit unsafe to come out against it. The contemporary academic has a taste for the going thing that was whetted by theory. When my own English department made an attempt to hire Fredric Jameson, I remarked to a colleague that I thought he was quite unreadable. "Who reads him?" he replied. "The point is that he has the reputation of being the leading Marxist in literary theory just now." He went on to report that a friend remarked of Jameson's having written a well-known book titled *The Prison-House of Language* that he, Jameson, ought to know all about that, having long been an inmate of the place himself. None of which, you understand, would have caused this man to vote against the department's hiring Jameson if it could. *Au* bloody *contraire*.

Those who came out strongly against theory—and they were not many—were promptly put down. Walter Jackson Bate attacked theory and was declared a back number, a crank. Frederick Crews, who read a vast amount of unsightly prose in order to launch detailed criticisms of the new theoreticism, was adjudged a fanatic. Peter Shaw's tough analysis of feminist criticism was easily dismissed on the grounds of its author being a neo-conservative. Others wrote against theory in various places and with various degrees of disbelief, petulance, and horror, but none of this was sufficiently sustained. Theory operated on the prestige of the avant-garde, the nouvelle vague, the cutting edge, and other (all) good things. To set oneself against it was to join the camp of blackest reaction,

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where dwelt the homophobes, misogynists, racist dogs, conservatives, and other bad persons.

However deep their doubts about the value of theory, to be placed in this camp not many teachers have been willing to risk. The contemporary university is a place of deep conformity, despite its outward appearance of being an Elysian Field in which the spirit is allowed to roam freely, and one that has ways of punishing heresy sharply and forthwith. Unlike the storied professor of yesteryear sinking gently into a fog of pedantic senility, the contemporary professor is terrified of nothing so much as seeming out of it. With-itry, bound up with whatever esteem he can muster for himself, is crucial to his academic existence. Theory has been very much with-it for some while now, especially among graduate students, and the professor concerned about retaining his standing had best not forget it. Whereas professors once existed in a state of superiority to graduate students, it is now no longer quite clear that they still do so. God pity the poor professor about whom the word goes round among graduate students that he is insufficiently (shall we say) attuned to feminism or any of the other O.K. isms. Out he goes to the academic equivalent of Coventry, Novosibirsk, Lapland. To be in good odor with graduate students by establishing one's bona fides as a theoretical allrightnik is one way of avoiding this sad condition of internal exile, even if one doesn't actually teach the stuff. In part, this is why not many senior professors have come out strongly against theory; in the souls of the cowardly there is, finally, no tenure.

For the most part, the teaching of theory, apart from feminism, seems to be done chiefly at the graduate level. Some of it seeps down to undergraduate courses, where notes about the new term's offerings are likely to include such enticing promises as that this course "will emphasize the frequency with which certain conflicts—involving power and justice, moral evil and social corruption, freedom and authority, gender and sexuality—recur in the plays," or that "close attention will be paid to representations of gender, class, and 'nature' in these novels." I have had a number of feminists show up in my own courses for undergraduates, but none has ever pushed the line with such insistence as to impede interesting classroom discussion. Five or six years ago I had a most earnest engineering

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student, a Jewish lad from St. Louis with untameable hair, who had just returned from a year abroad at Sussex University, where he came under the influence of deconstructionists, ask if, for his class paper, he could be allowed to deconstruct George Orwell. After he was done, Orwell, I have to report, was still standing and the poor kid appeared to have become quite unwired by his own self-imposed task.

If my experience is reliable, then, theory is largely a graduate school phenomenon, with only occasional incursions into the undergraduate curriculum (always excepting feminism, which is pandemic). Teachers nowadays freely politicize their subjects without any sense that doing so might be wrong or at least unfair, but this has been going on since the sixties, when the traditional conception of academic freedom was jettisoned. The deeper nihilism implicit (often explicit) in much theory—the destabilizing of language, the view of intellectual order as a form of oppression—is probably too complicated to teach to undergraduates. One cannot, after all, undermine a text without first knowing how to mine it; one cannot show what is absent without first showing what is there.

Theory has been slowed, too, by the fact that after all this while there are few essays or books written by its proponents that lucidly set out its methods and demonstrate its significance. Ask someone who has been swept away by theory, or even someone who has not but nonetheless claims to feel its cogency, what one ought to read to discover its attractions, and one is likely to be met with an embarrassing pause, or should one say an embarrassing paucity. "Parts of Derrida's *Grammatology* are awfully good," one will be told (which parts are never specified), or else one is sent to some tome that turns out to be filled with barbed-wire language about "foregrounding the metaphoricity" or the "vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration." Undergraduates need to consider less vertiginous possibilities, even the brightest among them, though this doesn't mean that many a newly minted assistant professor, still sailing along on a theoretical high, might not get in there and give it his best shot. Meanwhile, for those of us who are able to sight neither emperor nor new clothes, it is not pleasant to think that the preponderance of graduate students from the better—and even from the not so good—universities are being trained to

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study literature from the standpoint of what is false and rubbishy about it. And in departments where deconstruction and theory generally prevail, as Frederick Crews has written, "it will deprive a good number of students of the mental discipline that the older deconstructionists themselves received in an earlier phase of our profession. Weariness of rational standards in one generation becomes a pathetic ignorance of them in the next."

The sadness, the comedy, the grotesquerie of it all has been written about by no one more concentratedly than Roger Kimball. In *Tenured Radicals*[3] Kimball has produced a series of reports on various intellectual doings—conferences, journals, books, movements—undertaken during what might be called the grand age of theory. Mr. Kimball refers to his own work in this regard as "reports from the front." But often *Tenured Radicals* reads more like the work of a superior ethnographer recounting the odd customs and strange ideas of an extremely weird if not very wild tribe, one utterly devoid of common sense, humor, or pleasure in life as it is. But Mr. Kimball does find a common theme, if not quite method, to all this madness: it is politicization of the humanities. He writes:

> The issues raised by the politicization of the humanities have application far beyond the ivy-covered walls of the academy. The denunciations of the "hegemony" of Western culture and liberal institutions that are sounded so insistently within our colleges and universities these days are not idle chatter, but represent a concerted effort to attack the very foundations of the society that guarantees the independence of cultural and artistic life—including the independence of higher education. Behind the transformations contemplated by the proponents of feminism, deconstruction, and the rest is a blueprint for a radical transformation that would revolutionize every aspect of social and political life, from the independent place we grant high culture within society to the way we relate to one another as men and women. It is precisely for this reason that the traditional notion of the humanities and the established literary canon have been so violently attacked by *bien pensants* academics: as the cultural guardians of the ideals and values that Western democratic society has struggled to establish

[3] TENURED RADICALS: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education, by *Roger Kimball*. Harper & Row. $18.95.

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and perpetuate, the humanities also form a staunch impediment to the radical vision of their new academic enemies.

I agree with Roger Kimball's assessment. I believe that the academics who wish to change the canon and hence the curriculum, who have set out to shake confidence in language and hence in meaning, who insist on the indeterminacy of all literary interpretation, who tediously bang their kettles about patriarchy, Eurocentrism, late capitalism, elitism, and the rest really do have a political program, however inchoate it may be in the minds of some among them. It is an intellectual version of the Whole Earth Catalog—a pallid, boiled-down, warmed-over, unisexual, blandified Woodstockian vision of heaven on earth. Heaven for them, as I see it, hell for the rest of us.

The accusation against Roger Kimball, levelled by those university teachers who wish to cling to their middle-of-the-road liberalism, is that he is engaged in "professor bashing." The university is nowhere near so bad as he portrays it, they claim; he features the gaudy and the egregious, they aver. For his part, Mr. Kimball holds that things are even worse than most people imagine. A clear picture of what is going on is not all that easily attained. My own sense is that a reasonable quantity of traditional teaching continues to be done—old dogs, as some clever fellow once pointed out, aren't all that easily taught new tricks—at least to undergraduates. Some of this teaching is quite as dull and dreary as it ever was; some (always, inevitably, less) is genuinely impressive in its ability to inculcate habits of intellectual lucidity, critical thinking, and appreciation for both great works and the literary mode of thought.

But Roger Kimball is absolutely correct in inferring that this kind of teaching and thinking is not what is valued in university literature departments nowadays. It's the gaudy and the egregious that have been ringing the gong for some years now—that get the good jobs, the attention, the largest portions of the modicum of power available in academic life. As for jobs, those who don't have an "ism" after their names need not apply. In the English department in which I teach a job candidate was recently proposed who was both a new historicist and a feminist, and in response to her candidacy it was pointed out that

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the department already has someone who combines these two "isms" and cannot "afford the luxury" of hiring someone with the same intellectual profile. (Some luxury—like having two brain tumors.) Five or six years ago, I suggested to a professor influential in the department the name of a highly intelligent man with a reputation as an excellent teacher as a possible candidate for a job in our department. "No hope," he said, without any irony that I could detect, "I'm afraid that X [the man in question] is merely serious."

X still couldn't get a job in our department—nor, my guess is, in any other English department that is still if not dominated then at least cowed by theory and the theorists. To this extent, the situation has not changed. "I find it hard to imagine," wrote Frederick Crews of deconstruction in 1979, "that such a fashion will last for long." Fashions do change in universities, bad ideas can be disqualified, but things take longer than they do elsewhere in the world. Universities are on slower timetables than other corporations and concerns. One learns one is fired from a university teaching job and so must find another job—within fifteen or so months. A teacher is given tenure and he hangs around the joint for life. Then there is the percolating effect: fashions percolate down and so endure even longer. At Knox College, in Galesburg, Illinois, they are just now writing books about Jacques Lacan, and at the University of Oklahoma, in Norman, they are writing blurbs for them (see the Spring 1991 catalogue of the University of Massachusetts Press). Here is a little lineup of subjects presented by graduate students in Comparative Literature and Theory, English and Foreign Language departments recently presented at Northwestern:

1. "Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking in Rosario Castellano's *Oficio tinieblas*"
2. "Race and (De) Constructions of Female Sexuality in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*"
3. "Reading the Author Out of Text: Chapters 15 & 16 of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*"
4. "Adorno's Paradox Reconsidered: The Name of Auschwitz in Tournier and Wolf"
5. "Rethinking Cultural Studies: Notes from a Seminar at the Center of Psychosocial Studies."

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Read 'em, as the poker players say, and weep. Fashions change but people with a strong emotional investment in ideas of their youth often don't. The students who wrote those papers, it is discouraging to recall, figure still to be teaching forty years from now.

Yet there is some evidence that the ground is shifting, if slowly. Crews, Kimball, & Co have taken the adherents of the various isms of our day—perhaps they ought to be referred to as our "ismatics"—over the local coals but to damn little avail. Sound argument hasn't brought about the shift so much as have extraordinary events. And none has been more extraordinary than the revelations about the Yale literary critic and leading American-based guru of deconstruction, Paul de Man, having in his young manhood in Belgium written a vast amount of literary journalism for a pro-Nazi newspaper—and some of it, in the light of subsequent history, of a kind that ought to keep a man twisting in his sheets in deep shame every night for the remainder of his life. The Paul de Man scandal, as we may now think of it, provided delicious hot copy: bigamy, a deserted family, deep deception, an entire secret life, all of which de Man took to his grave, no doubt thinking it would be buried there with him forever.

The revelations about Paul de Man and his disciples' intellectually acrobatic, not to say contortionist, attempts to exonerate him by justifying his pro-Nazi past are taken up in lucid and careful detail in David Lehman's *Signs of the Times*.[4] In the department of statements people wished they never made, Professor Barbara Johnson, of Harvard, might like to enter the following, which she uttered at Paul de Man's memorial service: "In a profession full of fakeness, he was real." It was de Man, David Lehman reminds us, who wrote that "considerations of the actual and historical existence of writers are a waste of time from a critical viewpoint." (Enter this in the department of statements people—de Man in particular—wish they could have enforced.) Had Paul de Man only been a KGB agent, or a PLO terrorist, or a simple necrophile, later revelations about his deliberately obscured past might not have required so

[4] SIGNS OF THE TIMES: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man, by *David Lehman*. Poseidon Press/Simon & Schuster. $19.95.

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elaborate a defense of the indefensible. But a Nazi connection—this is a bit difficult to wash away. The attempts to do so, quoted extensively in *Signs of the Times*, make richly amusing reading and could stand in as the text for a university course entitled "Sophistry 101." David Lehman is finally devastating on this intellectually dishonest enterprise. "In their briefs for de Man," he writes, "they [his followers] have provided a dossier of proof that deconstruction is not a value-free science but a program that promotes a reckless disregard of the truth and a propensity for hero worship. And that is the final paradox of deconstruction: it *is* the crisis it pretends to expose."

Long after the Paul de Man revelations, two writers of considerable academic respectability, Helen Vendler, the literary critic at Harvard, and John Searle, the philosopher at Berkeley, weighed in with pieces that hum with the spirit of Enough Already! Helen Vendler, who is a past president of the Modern Language Association, wrote a quietly authoritative but finally quite scorching piece[5] on the untenability—not to say unhinged quality—of contemporary feminist writing. John Searle's was a more general essay,[6] which allowed a great deal that once would have been chalked up to conservative fantasies: first, that "literature [has] become the academic home of radical left-wing politics"; second, that the argument about the canon, which seems to agitate so many academics fired up by ethnic and genderesque passions, is largely bogus, since in Searle's "experience there never was a fixed 'canon,' [but] rather a certain set of tentative judgments about what had importance and quality"; and, third, that the academic critics who have worked so hard to show the indeterminacy of language, interpretation, and finally meaning itself have really called off the game, for "if you think there is no reality that words could possibly correspond to, then obviously it will be a waste of time to engage in an 'objective and disinterested search for truth,' because there is no such thing as truth." It is of no small interest that both Professor Vendler's and Searle's essays appeared in *The New York Review of Books*, a journal with certified left-wing

[5] Helen Vendler, "Feminism and Literature," *The New York Review of Books*, May 31, 1990.

[6] John Searle, "The Storm Over the University," *The New York Review of Books*, December 6, 1990.

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credentials and perhaps the first bastion of contemporary academic snobbery. That hit 'em, in other words, where it ought to have hurt.

I say "ought to," but I am not sure that these impressively argued attacks, or any other for that matter, can dent the armor of people living in what are essentially intellectual bunkers. The various theorists continue to spin their webs, demystifying the reactionary delusions of the rest of us in what before the fall of socialism they liked to call "late capitalism," sharing among themselves their turgid little ironies. The feminists roll on, perpetually angry, making perfectly comprehensible the joke about the couple in their West Side Manhattan apartment who, having been twice robbed, determine to protect themselves, he wanting to get a revolver, she a pit bull, and so they agree to compromise and instead get a feminist. Thus, attacking conservatives, Catharine R. Stimpson, who is dean of the graduate school at Rutgers, says that "under the guise of defending objectivity and intellectual rigor, which is a lot of mishmash, they are trying to preserve the cultural and political supremacy of white heterosexual males." This not from a member of Dykes on Bikes but, you understand, from the woman who is the outgoing president of the Modern Language Association. So many loony tunes, so few merry melodies.

In his history of the teaching of literature in the United States, Gerald Graff quotes a Germanist named Calvin Thomas who said that the literary generalists of the 1890s produced work that was apt to be "interesting but not true," while the philologists, who were their rivals produced work "which is apt to be true but not very interesting." The theorists of our day produce work in which one finds little that is either interesting or true; and no one, certainly, would argue that its charm is in its high readability or elegance. As for its content, the "open text" that many among them vaunt, with its endless indeterminate meanings, is finally rather like the "open marriage" of the early 1970s, providing as it does plenty of room for screwing around and with no ultimate responsibility.

I earlier referred to Professor Graff's book *Professing Literature* as tendentious. It is not merely a history with an argument but one organized around the promotion of an idea whose time figures never to come. Graff has attempted to show that the

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history of the study of literature in this country has been a history of intramural conflicts that have never come out into the open. He thinks it better to bring them not only out into the open but into the classroom. "What was needed, it might be argued, was a way of making the conflicts of literary studies part of the subject matter of literary education itself." Not only might it be argued, but Graff argues it, relentlessly, throughout his book, whose subtext is teach the damn conflict. Graff apparently envisions what used to be called a "dialogue" between people who deeply despise each other's ideas to be staged before their undergraduate students as a regular part of the curriculum. Apart from its potential for unconscious comedy or as litigation for public slander, this notion demonstrates a touching obtuseness about, first, human nature and, second, the way contemporary literature departments work.

The model for the contemporary literature department, I have come to believe, is the Russian Duma under the Kerensky government. By this I mean that, though liberals may be in the majority, Bolsheviks always win. They win because they are impelled by the spirit of cause that only true believers know; because they don't mind using rough tactics and dirty tricks to further that cause; and because, ultimately and crushingly, the Menshevik-liberals are terrified of being associated with anything that smacks of sympathy for any facet of the *ancien régime*. In many English departments—that of Duke University comes first to mind—the Bolsheviks have already taken over. Elsewhere they make it hot for liberals who would rather eat ground glass than not do what is construed to be the right thing.

The right thing just now looks increasingly to be the movement known as multiculturalism. Multiculturalism holds that every culture has its worth and therefore deserves expression and support. In an America that is becoming more and more populated by immigrant and ethnic and racial groups that wish to maintain their separate identities, this, at first flush, seems reasonable enough. The problem is that in reality multiculturalism is supercharged by its animus against what it characterizes as white male European culture, while in making its own case it is not overly impressed with accurate history, rationality, integration of any sort, or even with democracy. The way for

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multiculturalism has, of course, been handsomely paved by the spadework of theory and its practitioners, who have cleared the ground by their own attacks on language, meaning, hierarchy, past achievement, and tradition. As a professor of theological ethics at Duke University so piquantly commented: "The canon of great literature was created by high Anglican ---holes to underwrite their own social class."

Doubtless everyone associated with literary studies in the university will spend a good part of the next decade struggling against the logical outrages of multiculturalism, which has already begun its invasion of the high school curriculum. Perhaps, in education, it was always and ever thus, periods of brief progress interrupted by dips or serious plunges into obscurantism and nuttiness, one step forward, two steps back. As Sydney Smith once nicely put the matter: "If men had made no more progress in the common arts of life than they have in education, we should at this moment be dividing our food with our fingers and drinking water out of the palms of our hands."

Such are the niceties of current academic zaniness that restating the obvious—that most great literature is indeed separable from politics, that true culture is above gender, race, and class, that the point of view literature teaches is inherently anti-system, anti-theory, and sceptical of all ideas that do not grow out of particular cases also known as poems, stories, essays, and plays—restating all this has become nearly a full-time job and often a wearying one. Still, at moments of fatigue, when the absurdity outweighs the comedy, I find it comforting to recall an item from the notebooks of the biologist Jean Rostand. "*Les théories passent*," Rostand noted. "*La grenouille reste*."

Long live that frog and literature with it.

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LOUIS SIMPSON

Love in the West and Other Memoirs

Love in the West

The sun is shining, the sky is blue, there are people on the beach. Libero, who is in charge of the *bagno* "Antaura," makes us welcome, and Maximo the beach boy sets up an umbrella and brushes the sand off two deck chairs. Miriam stretches out on a towel and I sit writing these notes.

There's a sea of umbrellas colored orange, yellow, green, and blue. The Apuan Alps . . . pale blue, jagged peaks rising against clouds racked and piled in a sky bluer than the mountains. The clouds are shaded violet and gray, but there to the right, over the long back of a mountain, stands a puff of white cloud.

The Moroccans are going by. This one has dresses to sell; another, a case of sunglasses and combs; a third, sunglasses and watches.

And there are people . . . faces and bodies. Denis de Rougemont, whose *Love in the Western World* I have been reading, says that we are sold the idea of a standardized beauty, which changes with the generations. Our search for the person who will satisfy our craving for the ideal makes us reject any love that is possible. This is the myth of Tristan and Isolde. ". . . to love love more than the object of love, to love passion for its own sake, has been to love to suffer . . . Passionate love, the longing for what sears and annihilates us in its triumph—there is the secret which Europe has never allowed to be given away; a secret it has always repressed—and preserved! Hardly anything could be more tragic . . ."

Marriage would mean the end of passion, and so adultery is glorified. This leads to suffering and death. Rougemont offers a solution: one should marry and stay married with a passion

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that would be equal and superior to adultery. The trouble with most marriages is that people enter into them lightly. He appears to be saying that you should only fall in love with the person you can stay in love with.

Easier said than done! People will fall in love with people they shouldn't. The Greeks knew this . . . so did the authors of *Phèdre* and *Remembrance of Things Past*. So, for that matter, does every middle-aged man and woman on the beach.

It's more a matter of luck than he thinks.

Speaking of love . . . I received a letter from a friend saying that I'd left my best poem out of my *Collected Poems*, the one titled "Cliff Road."

It is about Point Mercy where I lived for ten years, and also, it seems, about my state of mind.

Walking on the road at night . . .
At regular intervals a street light
makes a green shelf in the leaves.
Houses give off a muffled sound—
TV, the murmur of voices
and roar of the studio audience.

From time to time a plane goes winking over,
heading for Kennedy or La Guardia.

You pass the house of Angelo Scalise
who came here from Chicago—
the biggest house on the street.
It seems there is always a limousine
parked near the gate, with a driver
who, when you pass, glances up.

Then the cottage back in the trees
inhabited by the Henderson sisters . . .
I have often seen them together
in the winter gathering sticks.

Then there is a slope and a path
that goes right down to the beach.
The fishers are sure to be there

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surfcasting, in absolute silence,
side by side but at a distance.

They start casting at Connecticut
in the sunset at high tide
when the shore seems to be drifting.
Then it's dark, you no longer see them
but, as I said, they are there
you can tell, by a faint white splash.

The road itself continues,
narrowing. This is Lovers' Lane.
It ends at a fence on a cliff,
looking at the lights on the opposite shore.

"Cliff Road" speaks of a time in my life that I don't want to remember . . . of wanhope and despair. The description of Point Mercy at night, the closed, hushed atmosphere, is also a description of the life of the observer. But I should have ended with the fishermen and the splash of the line in the dark. The lines that follow are an intrusion of the poet's rather limited view. Cliff Road narrows to Lovers' Lane, and this "ends at a fence on a cliff, / looking at the lights on the opposite shore." The poem suggests that love is a dead end and yearning for a happiness that is always beyond our reach. It's "on the opposite shore."

This is the conclusion and it just isn't true. Or it is true only for the speaker of the poem. This, of course, raises the question of truth and poetry. We have often been told that poets are liars, meaning that they make up things and these are not to be judged by ordinary standards. Yes, and when poetry is written as fiction it would be absurd to complain that it takes liberties with the facts. Imagination has its own truths that can be far more illuminating than observations of "life."

It would be different if "Cliff Road" were a story . . . the idea being expressed would be part of the story. But the idea comes at you straight . . . the feeling that love is hopeless seems to be the poet's and to be taken at face value. But, as I've said, it isn't true: love doesn't have to be a dead end. On the contrary, for many people it's an opening into the universe.

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The poem, as Gatsby would say, is just personal, and I think I was right to exclude it.

The House of the Stare

Come build in the empty house of the stare.
—W. B. Yeats

I'm back to looking out the window. To my left there's a woodpile, a fence, and a view of our neighbor's roof. Directly in front, a patch of grass with an azalea, a dogwood, and some evergreens that screen our garbage cans from the street. There are two beds of vegetables with wire around them to keep Willa and Custis out. Moving to the right . . . the square end of the hedge, the driveway, and a perspective of grass running up to the street. In the distance, tall trees against the sky. The view is framed on the right by a birch tree and a corner of the house.

The view changes from day to day and season to season. Today, the tenth of May, the azalea is robed like a prince of the Church in deep, almost purple red. The slender dogwood lifts arms with pink blossoms as though offering an oblation. It sways in the wind. I wouldn't be too surprised if it floated away from the earth and danced.

For years after I left California I couldn't put my finger on just what it was I hadn't liked about the place. I thought, the absence of history . . . at least, any that mattered to me. But that wasn't the whole answer. A few weeks ago, Miriam and I were in California, driving to San Francisco from Sonoma and Napa where we'd been looking at vineyards. As we approached the city I knew what it was . . . the barren hills. Rows of ticky-tacky houses perched on what seem to be mounds of mud. A green more like mold than grass. And no trees. In Berkeley when I lived there we had tall redwoods right in our yard, but in general the landscape of California is bare, and "I love no leafless land."

I go to the bookshelves to see if I have the line right, and find

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myself caught up in the book. When I was an adolescent I was much taken with Housman's poems. His pessimistic views appealed to me. I had the liking for tragedy that you have at fifteen when you know that all the bad things will happen to other people. You are trying on different roles, and self-pity is most pleasing. Reading *A Shropshire Lad* I could see myself as a forsaken lover or a soldier going overseas to be slain in battle.

I owned the book in a pocket edition I'd sent away for to England. I would take it out to the willows and read. The school kept us busy with classes and sports during the day and prep, that is, preparing the next day's lessons, in the evening, but there were times when I could be by myself. I would read beneath one of the willows that filed from the school gate down a curving drive to the chapel. They were always swaying and sighing in the wind that blew over the mountain, fit accompaniment to the poet's sad music.

> On russet floors, by waters idle,
> The pine lets fall its cone;
> The cuckoo shouts all day at nothing
> In leafy dells alone;
> And traveller's joy beguiles in autumn
> Hearts that have lost their own.

Within a year of reading Housman I had become modern: I was reading T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence. Today the author of *The Plumed Serpent* reminds me of a tour guide. He is wearing a pith helmet and khaki shorts that expose knobby knees and scrawny legs. His white skin is blistered and peeling. He is delivering a lecture on Quetzalcoatl to a group of schoolteachers from Muncie, Indiana, and telling them how rotten they are because they think with their heads and not with their solar plexuses. The women think he's the cat's pajamas. The men hope they'll be going back soon to the hotel and be able to slip away for a drink.

Eliot, however, has held up. I don't think much of him personally—he was a snob and racist—but when he wrote "Prufrock" and "The Waste Land" he surpassed himself. If five hundred years from now people are still reading English they'll be reading these poems. There is music here too, of another

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kind, and the images are fascinating. "The Waste Land" is about images.

> . . . you know only
> A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
> And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
> And the dry stone no sound of water.

We have lived among images, we are bombarded with images and confused by our senses. The thunder tells us plainly, "Give. Sympathize. Control." We know the way out of the waste land but lack the will to take it.

Going to bookshelves to check a quotation can be distracting. As I sit looking out the window I'm conscious of all the authors on the shelves behind me. Sometimes I feel they're encouraging . . . at other times I hear them saying, "What's the use? No one reads us. What makes you think they'll want to read you?" There stand Chaucer, Chekhov, Jane Austen, hundreds of poets, and the author of "Enoch Soames." How many students, how many professors of English, have even heard of "Enoch Soames"? And if the professors don't read literature, and most of them don't—they're too busy reading literary theory to read literature—what about the people who aren't in a university?

Is the House of Fiction closing down? The door only opens inward, and what if the key never turns? What will become of the characters? Will they stay forever in the dark?

> father, mother, child
> With painted eyes,
> How sad it is to be a little puppet!

On what page will they be? In which chapter? It's like the argument over the Last Judgment: when the world comes to an end and you are given the body you will have for all eternity, which you will you be? The one you were at twenty? At sixty? Or at five?

Suppose you were left eternally in a room by Robbe-Grillet with no one to talk to, only the furniture. Or in a storm at sea, forever pitching and rolling. Or at Gettysburg on the third day, among the troops waiting on Seminary Ridge. What if you are

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running all over Yonville trying to borrow money. Or, a few pages later, writhing in the throes of arsenic poisoning. And no one ever turns the page.

But I'm looking at it from the reader's point of view. We think we give the characters life. We're accustomed to picking them up and putting them down . . . sometimes in the middle of a sentence. And we think they ought to be grateful. But suppose they are the ones with life and we the illusion? People are still listening to Hamlet and Antigone, but is any man or woman from fifth-century Athens or England of the year 1600 still walking and talking? The names of kings and queens are scarcely remembered, but Keats's nightingale is still singing in somebody's garden.

I don't want to drive it into the ground, but fiction is more interesting, more alive, than most people's lives. Would you rather talk to Jane Austen's Emma or to Kimberly B. Watlington who, the *New York Times* informs me, is engaged to David Michael Bernard. "Miss Watlington, a marketing consultant at James Madison Financial Services in Philadelphia, graduated from Philips Exeter Academy and Smith College. She received an M.B.A. from Dartmouth College. Her father, who is retired, was a business manager at the Springfield, Mass., office of Alamen, a diversified electronics and industrial manufacturing company." These aren't people and marriages, they are assets and mergers.

So life will continue in the House of Fiction. And as reality is with the characters I don't think they'll mind if people stop reading. They're probably looking forward to the day when the "reading public" will disappear. It can't come a day too soon. They'll no longer be tied like serfs to the page. They'll be free to move . . . to a different chapter or right out of the book.

Many would prefer to be by a different author. The character in a novel by Dostoievsky will be able to move to *Dead Souls* and have a good laugh for a change. How good, after those endless discussions of the soul, to observe Chichikov cutting a figure in provincial society!

> Easily and gracefully did he exchange agreeable badinage with one lady, and then approach another one with the short, mincing steps usually affected by young-old dandies who are fluttering around

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the fair. As he turned, not without dexterity, to right and left, he kept one leg slightly dragging behind the other, like a short tail or a comma. This trick the ladies particularly admired.

Miss Havisham has been sitting shiva in her wedding dress, clamped to a chair. Now she's free to run and shout. What a pleasure to go to the toilet . . . to have a bath! She would like her hair restyled . . . to wear a Christian Lacroix creation.

And the brave artillery captain . . .

The brave artillery captain
who stands there taking the blame
for the Battle of Schöngraben
is thinking, "You can take your cannon
and stick them all up your ass.

Why should I 'stay in character'
and 'contribute to the plot'?
Anton Pavlovich [that's Chekhov]
told me, the last time he came,
he had an opening, just made

for a steady fellow like me:
as a merchant with a fat wife,
two daughters who like fine clothes,
a son who's a gambler and drunkard,
a mistress who wants a dacha . . .

On second thought, I suppose
'Better the devil you know,'
as they say, 'than the one you don't.'
I'll just stay with the battery
and try to do better next time."

*

It's been raining all afternoon in gusts, like hurricane weather though this isn't the season. It isn't unpleasant . . . on the contrary, rather exciting. I left the study and went into the

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house at five. As I came in there was a rumbling of thunder and Custis went by, tail down, heading for the basement. At the faintest sound of thunder he's off. If it thunders during the night I'll be waked by the shaking of the lamp next to the bed. It's Custis shaking, wedged in the corner between the lamp and the wall. Willa isn't so affected, only if it's a full-fledged thunderstorm with flashes of lightning and cracks of thunder. Then she'll make her way up to the bedroom too.

Veronica, on the other hand, didn't mind thunder a bit. Miriam thinks this is because she was raised as a pup not to mind it. The children used to sit up with her and say, "Look at the lightning!"

Or maybe it was in Veronica's nature not to mind. She was a westie and small but she had a great heart. She took a dislike to the United Parcel Service and would bark furiously when the uniform appeared to make a delivery. She ran from one window to another barking. The driver was in terror of her . . . he'd throw the package onto the porch and hurry back to his van. Miriam asked him why, since there was glass between him and the dog. He said, "You never know."

One afternoon on our walk with the dogs we passed through the wood where houses were being built. A German shepherd appeared with a paper bag in his mouth, the leftovers of some workman's lunch. The dog seemed mightily pleased with himself. Ron didn't hesitate . . . she charged. The shepherd must have been five times her size, but he took one glance at the bundle of white fury coming at him, dropped his bag lunch, and fled into the wood.

Every morning Ron would wait outside while I finished breakfast. When I appeared she would turn around and lead the way to the study, and she stayed with me all morning while I worked. She didn't take easily to people but she took to me, I think because I didn't try to make her like me. She gave Willa a wide berth . . . Willa growled at her. But Ron and Custis were companions, looking to each other for approval when they ran to the door and barked. Before Veronica came to live here Custis wouldn't come into the study . . . he didn't like being cooped up. But now that Veronica is no longer here he has taken her place and sits in a chair while I work.

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She is buried on the slope where she liked to sit and watch whatever was passing.

Tonight Inspector Morse was on TV . . . not a good episode, a far-fetched and complicated plot about a Japanese visitor to Oxford and some people intent on revenging an atrocity committed by the Japanese during World War II. The interest of the series is in the character of the Inspector and the byplay between him and Sergeant Lewis, but the British scriptwriter made the mistake, common with American scriptwriters, of relying on a plot and heaping violence on violence in order to hold the interest of the audience. It left you with the feeling of having been confused with details and cheated of a story.

The scriptwriter managed to get in two dirty cracks about America. One was about the American government's protecting a war criminal because he was an expert on the effects of poison gas. The other was about the Atom Bomb being dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki . . . some day the Japanese might exact a dire revenge.

British television is loaded with remarks of this kind, for it employs a number of people who dislike the United States for one reason or another. One reason is that in the States intellectuals, that is, writers, aren't held in great respect. An Englishman with a good education may not be of the upper class but he can feel superior to many people who don't have his command of language. To such a person democracy is repugnant . . . in the States he'd have less respect than a plumber or electrician.

Another reason is that many British intellectuals are politically to the Left. At this point they must be rather discomfited: Marxism hasn't turned out to be the Light of the World after all.

In the Soviet Union the intellectual would belong to a privileged group: he'd be in the Writers' Union, have access to potted grouse and other delicacies, own a car, perhaps a dacha in the country. In the United States, on the other hand, he'd be treated just like anyone else. This the Marxist intellectual cannot stomach. In his vision of things he is one of the Elect and deserves the best, or at least second best. One day when there's

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Government by the Saints he'll come into his own. Only America stands in the way of his dream.

But, surely, with the rejection of Communism throughout Eastern Europe the intellectual has begun to reconsider? Not at all, if you know anything about the psychology of the true believer. The Marxist-Leninist will be convinced more than ever of the infallibility of the dogma. So what if it never works, if life under Communism is a bureaucratic hell and there's no food or clothing in the shops. Whatever goes wrong is not the fault of the dogma but its fallible human practitioners.

Nothing is believed in as truly as a dogma that doesn't work. This only proves how perfect it is. *Credo quia absurdum est.*

"When you talk about America in your poems it reminds me of the starch laundries put in shirts for stiffener." The speaker was one of the New York Poets. He wore a perpetual sneer; a reviewer had called his poems snotty, and I could see why. I told him I didn't think much of his idea of poetry, making jokes, and we parted with mutual detestation.

Was it true? Were the poems I had written about America worked up?

When I was seven my mother left Jamaica and went to live in Toronto. Then she lived in New York. When my brother and I were growing up we saw her only when she came to the island on brief visits. She sent us books and small gifts from America. The word America evoked her handwriting . . . it meant love and all the things the books she sent talked about. It was the world of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, of Penrod and Sam.

Then there were the movies. For people who live in out-of-the-way places, movies are everything that life is not, exciting and romantic. At school there was an old projector that had to be cranked and two films without sound. One was an eighteenth-century play, *The School for Scandal*; the actors wore wigs and the subtitles were unreadable. The other was the Dempsey-Tunney fight. The film kept breaking. We waited in the dark steamy room where laundry was ironed. The cranking would start again, the figures flickering on the bedsheet that was used as a screen. Dempsey caught Tunney against the ropes and Tunney went down, and the film broke again.

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In the vacations we went to the movies. Those of us who lived in Kingston were particularly blessed: there was the Movie Theatre at Cross Roads, and the Palace and Gaiety downtown. Some of the movies that came to the island were British but most were American: *Beau Geste*, *The Dawn Patrol*, *King Kong*, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers singing and dancing.

> Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up,
> Fostered alike by beauty and by fear . . .

The movies made me want to go to America. And, in fact, they have made the whole world want to go to America, an America that exists only in the movies.

My father died when I was sixteen. The following year I came to the States and decided to stay. Once I had decided that this was where I would live I applied myself to learning about my adoptive country and made a clean break with no looking back.

I think I may have gone back once, but I only think so.

At school in the evening, after dinner and before prep, the boys used to stroll to and fro on the barbecue. This was a concrete-covered square the school was built around. We walked in twos or threes talking to our friends. Most often I walked with Peter Lopez. Lopez was a Spanish name but Peter didn't look Spanish, he was a typical English schoolboy though he spoke with a Jamaican accent. Many years later I would discover that the name Lopez was common among Sephardic Jews, some of whom had settled in Jamaica long ago. With Peter I talked about trains, boxing, and Gloria Roberts. She lived in Kingston and I had once introduced her to Peter. She seemed incredibly beautiful to me and, in proportion as she was beautiful, unattainable.

Sometimes I walked the barbecue with Beverly Dodd who was as avid a reader as I. We discussed *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and other adventure stories, or funny stories by W. W. Jacobs and P. G. Wodehouse. We read to be entertained. Between fifteen and sixteen, however, my tastes changed. Reading was no longer an amusement, it had become serious. I was becoming a writer, and the ways of this were to be brooded over in secret and not discussed with anyone.

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You walked from the main building to Long Wall and back until the bell rang for prep. Sometimes Patoo, the Owl, a dwarfish mulatto whose task it was to pull on the bell rope, was late in doing so, and in the few extra minutes of freedom a murmur rose from the barbecue. There was an air of happiness and excitement, a sense of what it would be like to be free. But then, inevitably, the bell would toll, and we'd go to the room where, for an hour and a half, we bent over our desks reading and writing. A Sixth Form boy sat at the front of the room to keep order. A master would look in to see that order was being maintained. The sportsmaster, Mister Dunleavy, liked to prowl on tennis shoes with a cane under his arm.

If the prefect were one we didn't respect, and the coast seemed clear, a small riot might ensue. Someone would shoot with a rubber band at the neck of a boy in front. Johnny Forsyth jumped up from his desk and brayed like a jackass, "Hee haw, hee haw!" He was holding his cock and he waved it up and down. "Ah cyan't read an' ah cyan't write, but ah cyan multiply!" This got a laugh though it was an old joke—we had all seen Johnny's cock-stands.

One evening before prep I was standing alone at the wall. The sun had gone down and the plain and sea beyond were growing dark. Over to the west at Black River there were two or three lights. I became aware of someone standing a few feet away. I'd been lost in thought . . . *The Return of the Native* or the battle of Waterloo . . . and hadn't seen him appear. He was a stranger, and this was remarkable. Very few visitors ever came to Munro; it was a long drive from the nearest town, then a drive up a mountain with dizzying turns.

The sportsmaster, Mister Dunleavy, appeared, heading for the infirmary. He was the lover of the school nurse, and every night paid a visit to the infirmary. He also hung around the dormitories when a certain young "colored" woman was working there, one of the servants who emptied the chamberpots, made the beds, refilled the water jugs, and scrubbed the floor. They were invisible . . . we didn't see them as human beings. But this young woman was beautiful, slender and doe-eyed. She was as beautiful as Tondelayo in the movie. Johnny Forsyth, who would have liked to multiply, had his eye on her.

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It was a question which would get to her first, Johnny or the sportsmaster.

The stranger turned to me and spoke. "Wasn't that Dunleavy?"

I said that it was. He said, "I remember him. He was a sergeant in the Great War and a football player. He'd been famous in England . . . he showed us his clippings: 'Dunleavy Scores Again.' He was a real star."

The last phrase marked the speaker for an American, but not exactly. His speech had traces of a British accent.

He said, "How long have you been at Munro?"

I told him. He said, "Then you'll soon be leaving. What do you plan to do?"

"I'm going to study law. My father's a lawyer."

We talked some more. He wanted to know where I lived. I told him that we lived at Bournemouth on the sea. It was only a short walk to Bournemouth Bath and I swam there every day during the holidays. On Saturdays and Sundays crowds of people came and a lot of tourists. I told him how silly the tourists looked, the way they dressed. When you saw them in Kingston they were buying a lot of silly stuff and spending a lot of money. They seemed very silly to me.

He said, "What about the people selling them all those silly things? Isn't there anything wrong with that?"

It was an idea that hadn't occurred to me. There were many ideas that hadn't occurred to me. I had the clear views of one who lived on an island: the way we thought was the only way to think. But I seem to recall admitting that he had a point. Then the bell rang for prep and I left.

Who was the visitor in the twilight who had come all the way from America? I think he was the one I am now, writing this.

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Property and Other Values

The cove is a meeting place for seagulls, ducks, geese, and swans. Occasionally there is a cormorant like a bird with a long neck in a Chinese painting. The cove opens on a small harbor. Most of the year it's quiet; in the summer, motorboats make a racket and the shore is littered.

As you round Cannon Point, where patriots are said to have fired on British warships, the larger harbor that gives the town its name opens before you; high ground to the east and west and the town in the valley between. All the services of a small town: a ferry, restaurants, gift shops, news agent, church, pizzeria, clothing store, supermarket, lawyer, automobile showroom, free library, tax assessor, optometrist, bank, are situated in four blocks next to the water. On the high ground to the east overlooking the town there is a large yellow building . . . Mercy Hospital. On the west side of the harbor three chimneys, two tall and slender, one shorter by a head and shoulders, thrust up in the air . . . the Lighting Company. It can be seen for miles around. The Company is the biggest industry in Green Harbor. Thanks to the taxes it pays, taxes on private property are low in the neighborhood. The residents appreciate this greatly: property and taxes are their main concern.

As you continue along the beach you pass Jefferson Park with its benches and trash containers. Every summer the mayor of our village sends out a notice:

ANNUAL FAMILY PICNIC

Aug 19 (rain date Aug 20)
Burgers . Hotdogs . Salads .
Watermelon
$5.00 per person $18 max per household
Beer Extra. B.Y.O.B.

The notice says there will be a Biathlon (see flyer) and Kids' Games (3 Leg, Water Balloon, Wheelbarrow, Sack). Adult Eggtoss LAST. At 5:00 there will be Food & Goodies, and AFTER, Music and Dancing.

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You can either retrace your steps or turn off the beach and go back through the woods. There used to be a large wooded area. That was before the man who owned the land decided to sell it to a developer. The developer submitted his plan to the county, and it was rejected: it would mean the destruction of plant and animal life. But the village can make its own laws, and the mayor and council gave the developer the go-ahead. "Moving right along, " says the mayor.

I used to walk in the woods on paths overgrown with thorns and branches. There were places where you had to cut your way through, like a tropical forest. Then you came into a clearing and stood listening to the wind in the leaves.

One day when I came to the clearing two men were there, having a conversation. One I knew, the man who owned the property, we had met on social occasions. The other was a stranger in a blue suit; he had sideburns and wore dark glasses. The landowner introduced me . . . Sideburns was the developer. They continued their conversation . . . about building houses. I said, "You're not building them here!" They turned and looked at me. "We're not?"

Construction was to start on Monday, and has been going on ever since: the clanking of bulldozers, the scream of a tree being fed to the machine that turns a tree into wood chips. On our walks Miriam and I have seen the houses in all stages of construction. A day to pour the foundation, two weeks to put up the frame. The wood is of the cheapest kind . . . it splits when a nail is driven. There are only a few inches between the inner and outer walls. Put in plumbing and electricity and a heating system, attach windows and doors, and *voilà*!, a house that sells for four hundred thousand dollars.

The design is Barbie and Ken, stamped out of plastic. Then there are what the developer calls "manor" houses, large boxlike structures that stand on their one acre like an elephant on a pea patch.

The woods have been cut down and the animals driven out. Traffic on the roads has doubled. The roadsides are littered with beer cans and glass, and the stones on the shore have turned black.

We know two carpenters, a married couple, who are building these houses . . . two of the friendliest people you'll ever meet,

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and it's good to see them working side by side, husband and wife, sawing and hammering. Besides, they like our dogs . . . they have one of their own. On our walks we stop to talk to them. I tell them they're destroying the world. When they drive by in their van on the way home he waves and shouts that they've finished their destroying for the day.

Can you blame a carpenter for practicing his trade? People need houses, and if they're willing to pay four hundred thousand for a house with thin walls and a basement that floods when it rains, that's their privilege. But was it necessary to cut down the whole forest? Couldn't a part have been saved for future generations?

I met the landowner at the house of a mutual friend. He said that his family had owned the land as far back as anyone could remember, and talked about the so-called ecologists who had tried to prevent him from selling it. He had a pale complexion that reddened with anger as he spoke. It was his property and he could do with it as he pleased.

He didn't give a damn for the future generations. What had they ever done for him, he wanted to know.

Some of the residents appear to be quite mad. One day when we were walking below the tideline, where everyone has a right to walk, it's the law, a stout man with white whiskers and a red face came shouting toward us, telling us to get off his property. I asked him how far he thought his property extended . . . he must know, only to the tideline. He said that this was arguable, and he said in a loud voice, "King's rights!" He was invoking a law that obtained in the eighteenth century, in the reign of King George, that gave people who owned a part of the shoreline rights to the land in front of it as well, at the bottom of the sea.

Some residents try to enlarge their property by encroaching on their neighbor's or on public land. This is done stealthily, by feet and inches. There are no sidewalks, but the ground next to the road, where a sidewalk would be, belongs to the village. One woman has extended her lawn right down to the road and placed large rocks in a line, a foot in from the road. She hopes by so doing to establish a claim to the strip running next to the road.

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I thought it far-fetched when I read in *Dead Souls* about Chichikov's playing chess with a man who tried to cheat him by moving the chessmen when he thought Chichikov wasn't looking. How could anyone cheat at chess? But was this more far-fetched than what this woman is doing, coming down at night with another large rock in a wheelbarrow, to place it beside the road? Some day she'll have established her claim to the strip of ground. I think the statute says seven years . . . if no one challenges your claim to a piece of land for seven years, it's yours to have and to hold.

Until death do you part. But this woman will shout from the grave that the ground next to the road belongs to her and no one else may walk on it.

All they seem to care about is property. And what's the alternative? The state owning the land and doling it out . . . to the deserving. The police state with its spies and informers . . . those who serve the state having what they want, the rest waiting in line. Who would want to live in such a world? Some would: they see themselves sitting among the rulers, telling others what to think.

"I'm an intellectual," one of them told me recently.

Every now and then a magazine editor thinks that it's time for an article on "contemporary poetry" and someone is foolish enough to write it. Poetry, he tells us, is in a very bad way in the United States. Why? Because only a few hundred people will buy a book of poems, whereas in 1810 *The Lady of the Lake* was immensely popular. Or else he tells us that poetry is flourishing because there are lots of poetry readings.

These people aren't talking about poetry but something else. They would like poetry to be like the ANNUAL FAMILY PICNIC. Burgers. Hotdogs. Salads. Watermelon. They see poets competing in the Biathlon, 3-Leg, and Water Balloon. Prizes will be given, and AFTER there will be Music and Dancing.

But poetry is written out of the need one has to write it. There is a void in oneself that echoes the Void without. I think Leonardo, and more recently a Surrealist, said that they stared at a wall until shapes began to form. If you look long enough into the void, sounds are heard and shapes begin to appear.

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This morning as I stared at the grass, leaves, and "a sky empty and void of ideas," a wedding was taking place. It actually happened a year ago: the son of a friend was being married. Our friend, the mother of the groom, had made bouquets of artificial flowers for the bride and bridesmaids, and she had also gone to considerable trouble making parasols for the bridesmaids to carry.

These people were Pentecostal Christians. If such people were typical of the "working class," the intellectual might consider them worthy. But many so-called ordinary people aren't at all typical . . . they have their own ideas.

Our poets, also, don't find them worthy, for they seem to be enjoying themselves. Our poets are not interested in other people, especially if they seem to be having a good time.

The wedding was to take place on a stage at the end of the church. This was decorated with a green arch with letters of gold . . . "Jesus Is Savior." There were baskets of artificial flowers . . . had Samantha made those too? There were several microphones. On the left side of the stage, that is, to our left as we faced it, there was a choir with a synthesizer and electric guitar. On the right side, an orchestra with a baby grand.

The synthesizer played the Wedding March and the bride and groom came down the aisle. She wore a white gown; her train was carried by two children, a boy and girl dressed in white. There followed half a dozen bridesmaids in gowns of various colors: lavender, peach, pink, blue, green and yellow. Each young woman was wearing a picture hat and carrying a bouquet and parasol, and each was accompanied by a young man.

Uncle Bob prayed over the groom:
"Let him establish Kingdom principles."
Aunt Shirley prayed for the bride:
"Father, I pray an anointing on her."
"Love," said Reverend Philips,

"is insensitive, love is invalueless."
He said that we merger together
in holy matrimony,
and the choir burst into song:
"He waits for us, and waits for us."

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*

Every day they went swimming in the pool
and rode the two water scooters.
They rented two deck chairs
and sat on the sand in the sun.
A breeze made the palm leaves whisper.

The sea is green close to shore,
further out it is blue.
The ship standing still on the horizon
makes you think of sailing away
forever with the one you love.

*

Jennifer ordered the roast beef platter,
Mike had the fish cakes.
"I thought you didn't like fish,"
she said. "Well," he said, "I guess you
  were wrong."
Tears came to her eyes. The honeymoon was over.

But then they went to their room
and everything was OK.
In the evening they went dancing
and stayed up late on the veranda
looking at the lights and the moon.

*

And you, *hypocrite lecteur*,
what makes you so superior?

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Some People

Rosina

Rosina the vivacious cleaning woman arrives all dolled up. She has had five children, she tells us at breakfast, of whom three are dead. The older surviving child, a daughter, is married. The younger, a girl of eleven, lives with her.

*

Vincenza tells us that Rosina, the cleaning woman who also does our laundry, had a quarrel with Renato and quit. Today she's back . . . Renato must have talked to her on the phone.

Rosina is explosive, a dark southern type with a pretty face . . . everything one would associate with Naples, Sicily, or Calabria. But she's from this part of Italy. I must tread softly when I talk to Rosina, for she does my shirts and underwear and socks.

*

Rosina goes up and down stairs *clumping* . . . you can hear her throughout the house. Rosalind doesn't want her to come into her room while she's there, for Rosina knocks everything about and makes a lot of noise. To exchange a few sentences with Rosina about the simplest matter is to be confronted with eyes that flash, eyebrows that go in different directions, shoulders and elbows in motion like one of those machines by Tinguely that are wonderfully ingenious and vigorously busy, with wheels and pulleys going around and pistons going in and out, to no visible purpose. Rosina works hard but her body has a life of its own that is not confined to the task in hand. Perpetual emotion.

The Waiter

The waiter was a funny fellow. It seems that every other waiter in Italy prides himself on having his own approach. This

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one's is to answer, when you ask what he recommends, "It's up to you to tell me, Signore. I *could* say spaghetti with crab . . ." He's as unwilling to be direct as Henry James. At the end of the meal he suggested a dessert. "Is it good?" we asked him. "There's no such thing as 'not good,'" he answered. "If it's 'not good,'" and he made a motion of flinging something with both arms into the night.

*

Only Miriam and I at La Casina this evening . . . "Why don't you advertise?" I ask the waiter, who happens also to be the owner. "In America they do." He goes into an explanation in bad English. Once Benvenuto Barsanti sat in that very corner and told him not to go to America . . . he was well off here. He explains that people work too hard in America. They're always jostling (this with gestures of his arms and elbows). He's been here for forty years.

There were many customers for lunch. Why people don't come in the evening he doesn't understand. If he advertised, urging people to come to the restaurant, they'd say, "He wants to make money."

The Ringleader

After discussing business—her accounts in New York, in Monte Carlo—Rosalind talks about her childhood in Russia. Where they lived there was a church across the street. In the evening she would leave the house—there were many people, so her absence wasn't noticed—and go to look at the church. At Easter they sang, "Jesus Christ is risen."

I say, "You didn't go inside," thinking that as a Jew she wouldn't have been permitted. But she says no, they wouldn't have minded, she could have gone in. I gather that she didn't.

Her sister Lisa was clever: she had a hat shop; she could take a piece of cloth and make a hat out of it. Next to the shop was a . . . she reaches for a word and has difficulty finding it . . . a delicatessen. The men used to butcher animals there, so that all her life she hasn't been able to eat pork. So it seems that in Lutsk Jew and Gentile lived and worked next to one another.

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The remark about pork is strange. Jews were forbidden by their religion to eat pork—it didn't require the sight of animals being butchered to give her an aversion for pork.

Her grandmother, her mother's mother, was a "special person." She had a restaurant . . . perhaps this is not the exact description . . . anyway, a room where people ate. She couldn't read and didn't know the numbers, so she kept the tally on a slate hanging on the wall, making the number 1 for every person . . . or was it every dish? (She has told this story before but repetitiousness is part of being old, indeed, of life. She is ninety-two or -three, and I'm not going to streamline these stories. What's the hurry? Where are we running to?)

They were very poor in Lutsk. Her grandmother had a favorite son who was a bugler in the Russian army, and she was happy about it because they had toilets. This one went off to fight in the war with Japan. When he returned he gave her (Rosalind) a fan.

Grandmother kept tomatoes and cucumbers on the roof. At night Rosalind would go up there and take some and bring them down to share with the other children. They wondered, "Where did they come from?", and decided, "It doesn't matter. Rosalind brought them." Grandmother was a good woman but it didn't occur to her or the other grown-ups that the children might want some tomatoes and cucumbers.

She tells this story with a smile . . . she was the ringleader. And Grandmother favored her, gave her pretty things to wear. The oldest sister, Ida, used to say of another sister, Eva, that she was imitating Rosalind. Eva used to sing when she was young, and wanted to be a prima donna. In Washington, D.C., when she was ninety her family gave her a birthday party, and Eva wanted to sing . . . at ninety! They let her sing but they disconnected the microphone.

If anyone was going to be a prima donna it was Rosalind. When she was older she took singing lessons . . . I've heard her say that a bad teacher ruined her voice. The thought of Eva singing into a dead microphone seems to give her a certain satisfaction.

The Man with No Interests

6 P.M. Renato's friend, the Doctor, comes on the path and up the stairs to the back porch. A man of perhaps seventy-five,

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retired and living on a pension . . . rather stout. He's on his way to eat at a restaurant.

Renato says that he has no interests . . . he doesn't read anything, not even a newspaper. Has no hobby. His first wife, by whom he had two sons, died, and he married again. His second wife visits and gossips with her friends. He likes to eat out . . . that's all.

He arrives, shouts for Renato, and sits as though he belongs here . . . a fat, smiling man with white hair. He stays for a few minutes listening to our conversation but not saying anything. He stands suddenly, shakes hands all around, and goes down the steps to his bicycle.

Miriam asks Renato how it is that a doctor never reads anything. He did once, Renato says, when he was young and a student. But now he has no interest in anything.

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DEAN ALBARELLI

Flames

My brother the priest is home, which means our mother is utterly in her element. Since Martin has no woman, of course, not even the proverbial housekeeper to watch over him (his parish is a small and poor one), our mother will outdo herself this weekend, joyfully ministering to Martin's needs. Already she is a woman of renewed purpose. Tall, sturdy, and bespectacled, with classic Irish features that none of us olive-skinned offspring inherited, she darts back and forth across the kitchen, pulling trays of hot cupcakes from the oven while I open two bottles of beer and place one before Martin at the kitchen table. "Federal," I say, "why don't you sit down and relax?" A certain nostalgia, generated by Martin's presence, prompts me to resurrect the nickname by which I referred to our mother in high school, when she would greet me at the front door most nights with the same five words: "Let me smell your breath."

"Never mind me," she says, "you just take it easy on that beer. It's barely noon."

"I know, but Martin's got a head start on me," I say; "he had his first drink at seven this morning."

"Baloney," she says.

"Martin, am I right or am I right?"

"Afraid he's right, Mom," Martin says, and he sweeps his black bangs from his broad forehead.

She furrows her brow and bestows upon Martin an expression of puzzled concern.

"See," I say, "sun's barely risen and Martin's hoisting the old chalice. Couple more years of daily masses and you'll have a bad habit, my friend."

"Oh, is that all," she says, setting before us a plate of cooled and frosted cupcakes. "I'd hardly call that drinking."

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" 'Is that all?' " I say. "Mother, we're talking about the Blessed bleeding Sacrament here."

"Well then," she says, "it wasn't wine at all, was it?"

"Touché," says Martin, and he peels a cupcake.

Federal smirks and leans over to finger Martin's Roman collar—not the plastic tab that most priests wear these days, but the older, more tasteful collar of heavily starched linen. "Remind me to buy some bleach later," she says, "that's looking a little soiled."

Martin nods and murmurs his thanks through chocolate crumbs.

"Which reminds me," she adds, "I saw Sheila and her son at the A & P yesterday."

A distinct flicker of interest dances across his eyes, though Federal doesn't notice.

"What's that youngest one's name," she asks, "Douglas? No, Gregory, I think." She pauses, laying an index finger over her lips. For all her commanding size and presence, our mother can be a rather silly sort of woman, much given to the distraction of insignificant details. "I always forget that child's name."

"*Any*way," I say.

From behind his cupcake, Martin smiles at me, but there is something gently admonishing in his eyes, as if to suggest, *Be patient with her*. Easy to be patient when she believes you're Christ incarnate.

"Well, whatever," my mother continues, "he looks just like his father, God rest his poor soul. Oh, what *is* her youngest son's name, Martin?"

"I think it's Gordon."

"Gordon," she says, "thank you. Anyway, I told Sheila, 'Father Martin's coming home this weekend!' "—she repeats this in the same cheery tone with which she doubtless related the information in the supermarket—"and she wanted to know all about your new parish. She said you wrote her a *love*ly sympathy letter after the accident. I think it meant a lot to her."

"You call him 'Father Martin' to Sheila?" I ask.

"Well certainly, dear. He's not 'Father Granotti' to her—my goodness, they used to date each other."

"That's what I mean," I say, "fifteen years ago he was copping feels off her—now she's supposed to call him *Father* Martin?"

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"Patrick, that is disgusting." She snatches a pot holder from the table and returns to the oven. "Martin didn't fly up here to listen to that kind of talk."

His face impassive as he touches a napkin to his mouth, Martin winks at me.

Federal pokes a toothpick into the cupcakes still baking. "It *was* nice of you to write to her, dear—Lord knows she's had a difficult year. Still looks terrific, though."

My mother is right about that, for I too have recently run into Sheila, and frankly wouldn't mind getting a piece of her widowed action. But I, for one, have had action enough in the past week, which is why, at age twenty-four, I'm living at home for the first time in five years. Never having been blessed with Martin's taste for celibacy, I recently took up with a spritely and energetic girl who follows the local band I sing with, a young woman by the name of Vivian Tresser. Like me, Viv is a drummer, but unlike me she is a high school sophomore, age sixteen. As it happens, her golf pro father is a rather protective and volatile man, not to mention something of an alcoholic. After he learned she'd been seeing me—that is, after he caught her sneaking back into the house one morning—he phoned to say that next time he'd break every one of my fingers, noting that I'd be lucky if I ever played "so much as a goddamn bongo drum again." By the second call, two nights and one rendezvous later, he got right to the heart of the matter, telling me in no uncertain terms that if I ever spoke another word to his daughter, let alone touched her, he would personally see to having me emasculated. What he finally did, or so I'm convinced, was set fire to my little rented bungalow outside of town. I reported my suspicions to a desk officer the next day, but the police won't even concede it was arson.

In any event, the important thing for me to do right now is lie low. Keep my fingers and other useful organs at home and intact. And the next time Vivian takes it into her head to call me here, make sure I answer the phone before Federal does. Because the look that woman gave me last night, standing in her nightgown and holding the receiver against her leg, was by no means uplifting. "For you," she said in a chilly monotone. Her mouth was pursed, and her eyes narrowed just enough to convey both disappointment and disdain—an expression of

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hers that I am barely less vulnerable to today than when I was twelve.

The fact is, this has always been a decidedly matriarchal family, which is, I suppose, appropriate for any good Catholic home. After all, even Saint Joseph is but a simple and ineffectual carpenter when stood beside the majestic mystery of Mary the Virgin Mother. Our own father, who passed away seven years ago, was by no means a wimp, but it was clearly always Federal who wore the pants here. Since Martin Senior's death she has become more solicitous of male opinions—of my brother's, anyway—but she remains a veritable monarch of a mother. We children—Martin and I and our two married sisters—were always suckers for parental approval, yet it was always our mother's acclamation that mattered most. Likewise, on those occasions when we committed some transgression or other, it was *her* disappointment we deemed most damning. And still do today, I suppose.

Federal now pulls a package of frozen whitefish from the freezer and runs it under warm water. (In recent years she has rarely felt compelled to serve fish on Friday, but Martin's being here is an exception.) "You two should take a walk while it's still nice out," she says. I suspect she's asked Martin to have a talk with me while he's home, and this is most likely his cue.

The two of us cut across the lawn and turn down the street towards the high school—the Catholic one, Martin's alma mater, which I was lucky enough to avoid. The sidewalk is littered with the thorny green casings of fallen chestnuts, which Martin scuffs at as we walk along. "D'you lose a lot in the fire?" he asks.

"Enough."

"All those books and tapes?"

I nod. The thought of the loss, still fresh, can prompt me any moment to tears if I dwell on it.

"I see you saved the pedal bass, at least."

"And the snare. Needs a new batter head, though."

He nods, scowling slightly to convey his sympathy. "I've got some clothes stored in the attic, if you need anything."

"Thanks," I tell him.

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We walk in silence for a time, somehow a little less at ease with each other than we were in Federal's presence.

By the time we reach the high school, someone's burly Saint Bernard has joined us, loping along at Martin's side. We cross the football field and the cinder track to the old cement grandstand. The dog takes off after a squirrel.

"Mom tells me you're thinking about going back to college," Martin says, starting up the crumbling steps.

"Not really, I just wanted her to stop hounding me about it."

"Oh." He stops at a row near the top, brushing a piece of broken glass from the seat and sitting down. "Still, you'd only have, what—thirty, forty credits left to do?"

"More than that. Anyway, a B.A.'s not going to land me a recording contract."

"No, but if you ever wanted to do something else, later, it could help."

"I suppose," I say.

For Martin, as for Federal, the highlight of my music career occurred eight or nine years ago, when I played guitar for several months at the Newman Center's folk masses. Still, any time the band lands a gig in Boston, or if we get a feeler, say, from some record exec in New York, it is most likely Federal I'll find myself calling with the news. As I say, she'd rather see me with an acoustic guitar singing "Michael, Row Your Boat Ashore," but she's still one of the O-Zones' biggest supporters, and every few months insists that I bring the other four band members over for dinner.

Martin is quiet now, lobbing pieces of cinder onto the track, and I wait to see if he's concluded his little homily on the virtues of college.

"Good place to meet some girls your own age, too," he says, trying to soften the remark with a slight smirk.

"Jesus, Martin, give me a break." I stand up and jerk my head towards the track, and he follows me back down.

"Sorry," he says. "Can't help wondering why you're seeing a girl who's only sixteen, though."

"Martin, it's not quite so hot and heavy as you'd think," I say. "I mean, the fact that her old man burned me out makes it look like there's a lot more to it." There is something less than convincing in my voice, and he glances at me.

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A gust of autumn wind hits us head on as we cross the football field, billowing Martin's windbreaker out behind him like a hunchback. "Sixteen's pretty young, though, Trick."

"Well, Horatio, I guess there are just more things in heaven and earth, et cetera, you know?"

"What the hell's that mean?"

I shake my head.

"What," he says, "you're going to tell me she's sixteen going on twenty-six, I suppose?"

"No, she's sixteen going on seventeen, that's just the point."

"You've lost me, Patrick, what are you saying—you're into minors now?"

"Yes, Martin, I'm into minors now. Jesus fucking Christ."

"Well I can't read your mind! And that wasn't His middle name. What are you telling me?"

"I don't know," I say, "it's not worth explaining, I just . . . there's something very refreshing about a girl who's still so . . . unjaded by the world. She's still got that sort of adolescent idealism about her. I like that." Which is true, though I suppose I'm equally taken by her pristine and nubile beauty, a fact I don't bother mentioning just now.

Martin watches me, waiting for more, and I shrug. "I mean, shit, Martin, half the girls my age just want to earn an M.B.A., for Christ sake. Make a killing on Wall Street."

"You just need to look harder," he says.

"Hey, you think I've been cloistered the last five years? I'll give you a typical example. I went home with a girl a few months ago, after we played Hunt's one night? Twenty-three, very articulate, *stun*ningly attractive. We get back to her place and have a few drinks, start getting a little cozy on the sofa. Somehow we start talking politics. And this girl tells me she thinks Reagan's actually been good for the country. She really likes him!"

"Lot of people do."

"Well, it was all over at that point. I mean, my flower just wilted."

"And?"

"And nothing. I got the hell out of there."

"So that's why you're seeing a sixteen-year-old?"

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"Martin, it was a de*flat*ing experience, not traumatic. I told you, there's a lot I like about Vivian."

He nods. "Her adolescent idealism."

"That's one thing, yeah. There's something sort of . . . I don't know, redeeming about that. You understand redemption, Martin, right? It's this concept where—"

"All right, back off."

And at that moment I literally do stop and let him proceed ahead of me, because we've reached the narrow hole in the fence that borders the high school's playing fields. We step back onto my mother's street, where Mrs. Billaport, out raking leaves, looks up and waves at us.

"I don't know, Trick, maybe it's all harmless then. Maybe it is. I just don't like seeing you court more trouble than you need. And I've gotta tell you, if I had a sixteen-year-old daughter who was seeing a twenty-five-year-old guy—"

"Twenty-*four*, thank you."

"Okay, twenty-four. Anyway, I'd be concerned too."

"Well," I say, "it's not a spot you're likely to be in real soon, is it?"

He closes his eyes in a gesture of patient exasperation. "Try to think of Mom anyway, okay?"

"Don't I always?" I say, not meaning the remark nearly so sarcastically as Martin surely thinks I do.

That night, just as we're finishing a late dinner of whitefish and broccoli, there is a knock at the front door. When I answer it, Sheila is standing there in a blue Scandinavian sweater and black Levi's, a handsome leather purse hanging from one shoulder. "I hope you're not eating dinner," she says wincing slightly. A faint blush spreads slowly across her creamy complexion.

"No! Come on in," I say, and I call to Martin.

He wanders in from the dining room, wearing lay clothes now, and throws his head back in cheerful surprise. "Well hello!" he says, greeting her with a hearty but somehow asexual embrace.

Sheila stands on her tiptoes to hug him, her hands stiff and awkward near his shoulders. She steps back and glances at the napkin in his hand, then peers uncertainly towards the dining

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room. "I guess I should have called first," she says, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. "I'm so used to eating early with the kids."

"Not at all," Martin tells her. He takes her by the elbow and leads her into the dining room, where Federal immediately begins plying Sheila with coffee and dessert. Federal, in fact, is being particularly courteous and solicitous of Sheila—too much so, which puts each of us uncomfortably in mind of the reason: last winter, about ten months ago, Sheila's husband was killed in a freak ski-lift accident. Any moment now I expect that Federal will begin telling her how the first two years are the worst, but that you never completely lose a person you've known so long and so well; that strangely he is still there whenever you need to talk, that it can be like a form of prayer. Mercifully, though, we are spared that spiel.

Watching Sheila sip at her coffee there beside Martin, I remember that in one of my drawers upstairs there is a black-and-white snapshot, circa 1969, of the two of them sitting at this very dinner table. Sheila wears bangs and braces in the picture, and for some reason she is holding my father's pipe in one hand; Martin, beside her, sports a haircut that sneaks daringly over the tops of his ears, flashing his familiar lopsided smile. A cake with seventeen candles blazes before him, and I, at age seven, white shirt buttoned clear to my throat, stand at his side. His left arm is draped across my back, drawing me closer to help him extinguish the flames.

For the longest time Martin and Sheila were more or less my ideal of what a guy and his girl were supposed to be; but when Martin went away to college, already with a notion of transferring to the seminary, he encouraged Sheila to begin seeing other people. He'd always *talked* about the priesthood, but giving up the likes of Sheila struck everyone as another matter altogether. Everyone but Federal, that is, for quite aside from actively encouraging his contemplation of a religious life, she has, I believe, always perceived our girlfriends—the serious ones, anyway—as a threat to her own sovereignty. In any case, Sheila took Martin at his word, and before he was even ordained, she was engaged to a young intern she'd met at work.

At Martin's request, she has just pulled out pictures of her three children, when the phone rings and Federal gestures that

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it's for me. The solemn tone with which she tells the caller that yes, Patrick is here, leads me to suspect it is Vivian on the line. I excuse myself and take the call upstairs.

To my surprise, it's Detective Lebow on the phone, wanting to verify a few details from my statement. "Looks like we might have a witness to arson out at your place," he finally allows. "Jogger saw a guy with a kerosene can that night. We're going to question your girlfriend's father in the morning."

"Detective. I told you, she's not my girlfriend."

"Right, I remember now. Anyway, you keep cool, Patrick, and I'll get back to you when we know more. By the way, you're not still seeing this girl, are you?"

"No, Detective, I'm not still seeing her." Better to lie to the law, I think, than take a chance of pushing Viv's father any further. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I don't know," he says, "I was just thinking if you were, you might want to watch your back. Guy could mean business."

"Thanks," I tell him. "I'll remember that."

I wander into my old bedroom, suddenly exhausted, and fall down on the bed. I should go downstairs and visit, I think, I should at least remove my contacts if I'm going to fall asleep, but instead I lie there and toy with some numbers. Like sixteen. When I was sixteen, Vivian was . . . eight. Not good. Okay, when I was twenty, she was . . . twelve. Probably a very sexy little twelve, but still a definite no-no. So what about it—sixteen and twenty-four? A little out of the ordinary, but hardly a perversion of human nature. Twenty-one and twenty-nine? Twenty-five and thirty-three? Who'd bang war drums over twenty-five and thirty-three? Suppose J.C., at thirty-three, had told his Old Man, "Screw this crucifixion gig, I've got a great thing going with that Magdalene chick. She's twenty-five, she knows how to please a man, and she thinks I'm the cat's meow." Who'd blame him? That is, who'd blame Him? Not me. That is, not I.

But by then I must be more asleep than awake, because the whole scenario seems logical somehow.

An hour later, eyes stinging, I wake gratefully from a dream in which my mother's house is ablaze. Flames spiral out the roof and windows, and Martin stands beside me in the middle of the

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street. Several times he pushes me towards the house and says, "Blow it out! Jesus, *do* something, blow it out!"

I sit up and sniff for smoke, then pull my sneakers on and head downstairs for some coffee. From the kitchen I can hear Federal bidding Sheila good-bye out on the front porch. I stroll into the living room and glance out the window to the driveway, where Martin is getting into Sheila's car with her.

In a little while Federal wanders back in to the kitchen carrying several dirty cups and saucers, and dons her eternal apron.

"Tell me," I say, turning a page of the newspaper, "that wouldn't have been Father Martin I saw driving off with the lovely widow Crouse?"

She releases a breathy sound that's half sigh and half laugh. "I guess your brother's a very hip priest," she says. "Jeans, a turtleneck, and a pretty woman—I don't know. I bet his parishioners would never stand for that."

"His parishioners," I say, "won't even take Communion from a lay person."

"Is that true?"

"So Martin says."

"Well, they wouldn't like this then. Not that it's anyone else's business. Still, I wish he'd worn his collar." She runs a yellow sponge under warm water. "Then again, maybe that wouldn't be such a good idea either."

"Mother, he's thirty-four years old, let him be a little bit normal. Let him be a little *ab*normally normal."

"What's *that* mean?"

"I mean celibacy's odd enough—you can't expect him to banish half the human race from his social life."

"Well of course I don't. In fact, I think it's very nice that he and Sheila have stayed friends." She studies a trace of lipstick on one of the mugs, then vigorously swabs it clean. "There's no reason they can't take in a movie together," she says.

"Say it enough times," I tell her, "and you'll convince yourself."

Around eleven o'clock I'm lying on my bed listening to a local DJ who occasionally plays a single we cut last summer—a locally produced job—called "Status Quo." Frankly, it's not one of our

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better tunes, and this, I've discovered, is the best way of finding the song's flaws—hearing it more or less unexpectedly on the radio. The "A" side of the record, a song called "Black Sheep, White Shepherds," was our best hope for a hit, but it's a little too political for the likes of local listeners. I'm not sure I've got the right station—all these DJ's have the same inane sound—so I keep toying with the dial, and every time it edges past 98.5 I hear fragments of Gary Puckett and the Union Gap singing "Young Girl" (*You're just a bay-bee i-in dis-guise . . .*). As if I needed any more advice on that score.

I'm about to get undressed and turn in for the night, when a movement outside the window catches my eye. I sit up and snap the radio off—and Jesus Christ, there's a guy in a white shirt clambering over the deck railing. Vivian's crazy father has come to finish the job!

I flick the light out, and as I do so he raises one arm as if he's about to throw something. I cover my head and dive for the closet, rooting around for a baseball bat, an umbrella, something to swing at this sick fool before he gets in here and makes a soprano of me. By the time I locate an old tennis racket, heavy and lethal in its wooden press, he's begun prying at the window.

My heart is about to pound through my chest, and I slowly edge over to the window, both hands gripping the tennis racket.

But the nose and lips mushed up against the glass are not those of a man.

"You little *fucker*," I whisper out loud, my foolish terror giving way to a heart-fluttering relief. I flick the light back on, slide the window open, unlatch the storm and slide it.

Vivian chuckles and bumps her head as she bends to climb in. "Hey little drummer boy! Did I give you a scare?"

"Shhh! More like a cardiac," I say, leaning forward to meet her kiss. "You're lucky I didn't clobber you."

"You were really a riot," she says. "You know you're actually white? I never realized people really turn white when they get scared."

"People turn black and blue when they get beaten," I tell her. "Does your father know where you are?"

"Of course, I'm at Carol's for the night."

"This isn't smart," I say.

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"Well, you said not to call you here—how else am I going to talk to you? Anyway, I brought you something, you ingrate." And reaching behind her she draws from the back pocket of her jeans a pair of Regal Kip drumsticks, size 5A, medium tapered tip. In red engraved letters above the manufacturer's imprint, one reads *for P with* and the other *L from V*. "Don't let anyone use them for kindling," she says.

I kiss her mouth, which is cold from the night, and she takes this as an invitation to plop down on the bed, extracting from her hair her white plastic hair band and setting it on the desk.

"How'd you get up on that deck?" I ask, twirling one of the sticks.

"I dragged a garbage can over and shinnied up the post. Don't worry, I cased the whole house first. Nobody's up except a guy and a woman drinking coffee in the living room. Real pretty woman—who is she?"

"Must be my brother and his friend."

"That's your brother? I thought he was a priest. I mean, he didn't have a collar on or anything."

"It's there," I say, "believe me. You just can't always see it."

She nods, smirking, fairly glowing now with the excitement of her late night exploit. Her smirk broadens into a smile, and she lies back on the bed, nuzzling her face against my pillow. "Maybe I can just stay here tonight," she says. "I could get back into Carol's before everybody's up."

"That's a thought."

Viv kicks her sneakers off and lies there grinning on the mattress, taking in the furnishings of this old room as if they revealed something intimate about me: an uncomfortable wooden chair I built in the Boy Scouts; an autographed photo of Buddy Rich; and, stuck in an old wooden frame, a black-and-white photograph of Martin celebrating his first mass.

I step over to the door and lock it, but can't help hearing its muffled *click* as a tongue clack of disapproval from down the hall.

Vivian hooks her finger into my belt loop, and I settle down beside her with my hand on her hip. Beneath her blouse I can make out the twin risings of her brown-nippled breasts, all taut and firm with unfinished growth. Gary Puckett is still crooning

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at the back of my brain: . . . *'cause I'm a-fraaid we'll go-oo too faaarr . . .*

But of course that horse is long out of the barn.

Later, with the mattress on the floor because of the squeaky frame, Viv smiles sleepily and gives the sheet a modest tug that leaves only her smooth-skinned shoulders exposed.

"Better not get too comfortable," I say.

"I am comfortable," she murmurs. "Do you have an alarm clock or something?"

"Really, Vivian."

"What's to worry about?" she asks, rubbing her cheek against the inside of my arm.

"Death by fire. We've got to start being a lot more discreet. If anything."

She opens her eyes. "Wasn't this pretty discreet?"

"Yeah, I kind of wish you'd used the chimney, though."

Her expression remains earnest. "He won't know I'm still seeing you, Trick. Besides, if he only met you, I know he'd change his mind. He went back to AA this week, and once he dries out—" She stops. "What do you mean, 'If anything'?"

"I don't know." I wave a hand dismissively.

She scowls and sits up, clasping the sheet to her chest. "Your mother's been saying things, hasn't she? I could tell she hated me when I called the other night."

"Nobody hates you, Vivian—she's never even met you."

"But she's been saying things, hasn't she?"

"More my brother, actually."

"Oh, great, a whole welcoming committee."

"Viv, it's me they're annoyed with."

"But why?"

"Because. They think it's, I don't know, unfair to you."

"To *me*? But that's so . . . *sex*ist."

"I guess. I don't know. I've kind of wondered myself a few times if you should really be, you know, seeing someone so much older."

She looks at me in genuine surprise. "I thought you said I was so incredibly mature for sixteen?"

"You are! You are."

"So?"

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"I don't know, maybe your first serious relationship should be . . ." I shrug.

She's silent now, chewing on the inside of her lip. "But I thought . . . I don't know, I just thought . . . aren't we in love?"

Her eyes have gone glassy suddenly. To be honest, it hasn't been much discussed, love. The fact is, I've been so preoccupied with the snickering amusement and disapproval of every other person I know (and a few I don't know), that I've half doubted the sincerity of my own part in these doings. After all, it's a little disconcerting suddenly to find your sense of well-being so entirely dependent upon a girl too young to remember Watergate. A girl whose womanhood only announced itself—in a friend's swimming pool of all places, shocking both young bathers into a panic—a scant three years ago. So I've kept love—both word and emotion—on a short leash with little slack, half convinced that any day I'd be supplanted by some skate-boarding bopper from Driver's Ed.

But watching Viv's eyes well over into tears now, I touch the edge of the sheet to her cheek and whisper with conviction, "We are." And it occurs to me, as I fold her body into mine, that reasoning with Daddy Dementia is still not out of the question. I could take my earring off, put a clean shirt on, wear my sincerity on my sleeve. Why not? Tomorrow even. Meantime, caution.

We straddle the windowsill and step out onto the deck, where the main support post is about fifteen feet from the top of the overturned garbage can. The post is more squarish than round, which makes sliding down it the least bit awkward and uncomfortable. Vivian, however, is like a little monkey. By the time I get to the bottom I've got a splinter the size of a kitchen match sticking out of my thumb. I'm not looking forward to getting back in this way, but I don't have a key on me, and my mother locks the place up like a fort at night. "I'll walk you to Carol's," I tell Vivian, "just let me see if there's a key under the front mat."

Sheila's car is parked in the driveway, though she and Martin must be in the kitchen now, because the dimly lit living room is empty. In the darkness of the long screened-in porch, I bend to feel beneath the mat for a key. Vivian spies Tripod, my

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mother's three-legged cat, at the opposite end of the porch, and tiptoes quietly after him. There's no key under the mat or milkbox, and I signal to Vivian to come on. In the weak light from the living room windows she's barely distinguishable, leaning against the railing with the cat in her arms.

"Com'ere," she whispers, beckoning with one hand.

I cross the creaky boards to where she sits. A few quiet strains of George Winston's piano drift out from the living room stereo. "Can you still see your brother's collar?" she says.

At first, because of the high arm of the sofa, I don't see anything. But then, beyond the sofa's arm, I see two other arms, human, clad in blue sleeves with white snowflakes and enfolding a familiar form. Martin and Sheila are lying full-length along the sofa, their heads merging in a slow and lengthy kiss. They are both fully clothed, even down to their shoes.

"Jesus, I'll be damned."

"I bet he'll be," Viv whispers, releasing a little laugh and burying her mouth in Tripod's neck.

Sheila's hand slides up Martin's back to caress his thick black hair, then traces a line down his shoulder. Viv chuckles again and I draw her away, feeling, briefly as if I've just witnessed a kid brother's first conquest.

Tripod pads along behind us, and just as we reach the street there is a quick metallic sliding noise from up near the deck, punctuated by a sharp *clack!* and the tinkling of glass. The storm window I left open.

Almost immediately a light goes on in my mother's bedroom, and a moment later there is another in the hall at the top of the stairs.

"Shit, I hope Martin heard that." I stand there in the middle of the street, staring helplessly back at the living room windows as I did in my burning house dream. "Wait a minute," I tell Vivian, and I dash back to the porch.

On the sofa, Martin and Sheila are still going at it like a couple of teenagers. For a moment I consider knocking on the window or ringing the doorbell, but I hesitate. And in that moment of hesitation, Federal, in her powder blue nightgown, appears on the bottom step of the dining room stairs. She peeks

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out into the living room, squinting slightly, and then freezes. Quickly, she turns and disappears up the stairs again.

Martin and Sheila continue on making the beast with two belt buckles, both blissfully ignorant until Martin suddenly sits bolt upright and cocks his head to listen. He puts a finger to his lips and strains forward, then shakes his head and relaxes, easing back into the welcome warm arms of his old flame.

When I go downstairs for breakfast the next morning, I can hear Martin in the second floor shower. Singing in the shower, to be precise. In the kitchen, Federal sits quiet and unmoving behind the local section of the paper, a cup of coffee cooling untouched in front of her.

"There's some bacon by the stove," she says dully.

"Thanks, I'll wait for Martin."

She half nods, curtly.

I'm none too eager to witness the greeting he's likely to receive upon making his way down here. Last night, when I returned from walking Vivian to her friend's house, Sheila's car was gone and the house was completely dark. I considered scrambling back into my bedroom like some dim-witted Romeo who's got the balcony scene backwards, but instead opted for ringing the doorbell. I figured Martin might still be awake, and after a full minute I'd just about given up when Federal came to the door in her nightgown, looking bleary and aged, and more than ever, widowed. This morning it will take her only a glance to make Martin aware that his transgression has been divined.

Setting the paper down, she now covers a yawn and says somewhat peevishly, "Patrick, I wish you'd take a key if you're going to be out so late. It's not nice getting people up in the middle of the night."

"Sorry," I tell her.

"Where did you go, anyway? I thought you were here when I went to bed."

"Just out."

She looks at me over the top of her glasses and says quietly, "Not with that young girl, I hope."

I take a sip of orange juice. "You mean Vivian?"

"Whatever her name is."

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"Well I'm telling you: it's Vivian."

Her mouth tenses and she tries to stare me down, but I won't allow it, and with a twitch in her lip she silently retreats to the paper. On the surface, of course, this is a minor moment, a trivial snapshot of family friction, yet within the quirky confines of our particular dynamic it is something more. I've just drawn an updated map of her circumscribed sovereign territory, and, however displeased the maternal monarch may be, she knows there's no disputing my cartography.

A few minutes later, Martin, his hair slicked back, dressed in a work shirt and corduroys, trots down the stairs whistling "Yuletide Garland," though Christmas is more than two months away yet. He doesn't have a clue about Federal, and I can't help feeling a certain uneasy spectator's interest.

She is standing before the open refrigerator when he enters.

"Morning," he says, and he claps me on the shoulder.

Federal turns and, apparently not opting for the quick kill, says in a vaguely ironic voice, "You're finally up?"

"It's not *that* late, is it?" he asks. He gives her a peck on the cheek, which she accepts rather stiffly.

"How was the movie?" she asks.

"Oh, it was okay. Nothing special." He sits opposite me and pours a glass of juice.

"Hmm," she says. "Sounds dirty from the review I read."

Martin glances at me and I roll my eyes. "Well, it might be hard put to earn the imprimatur," he says, "but it wasn't so bad. A little gratuitous nudity. Nothing harmful."

"Hmmm," she says again.

Martin begins slowly tapping his fingers against the tiny juice glass; it seems he's finally begun to gauge the temperature in here. He lets out a slow breath and rubs his palms along his thighs, then draws from the wide slash pocket of his pants his limpish white collar and sets it on the table.

For all I witnessed last night, even I hadn't bargained for this.

Federal stands whipping a bowl of eggs at the sink, her hand slowing to a mere stir as she glances at the collar, at Martin, and at the collar again. Lying on its edge in a wide U-shape, it reminds me of Viv's plastic hair band.

Martin nods vaguely at the table. "Just in case you get a chance to bleach it for me," he says.

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I believe I hear a literal sigh of relief pass through Federal's nostrils, though her only verbal response is a sort of grunt. She carries the bowl of eggs to the stove and drops a pat of butter into a pan. Her back turned to both of us, she says in a dullish tone, "I hope we'll at least get you all to ourselves tonight. The girls are driving over for the weekend," meaning our sisters and their families.

Martin winces slightly. "I wish you'd told me," he says, rubbing at his freshly shaved chin, "Sheila invited me over for dinner. She was sort of hoping I could meet her kids."

Facing us now, Federal blinks and turns back to the stove to lower the gas jet, then turns to Martin again. "What do you mean?" she asks finally.

"I mean eat dinner and meet her children. Eat *with* all of them, I guess."

Federal is silent.

"Those kids are probably starved for some male attention," I say. "Anyway, Em and Gloria'll be here all weekend."

Martin looks encouraged by this, but doesn't say anything. Then, turning to Federal he asks, "Okay?"

"You're a grown man," she says, "you can do whatever you want."

"Mom, give him a break, will you? So he wants to have dinner with Sheila?"

"I didn't say he shouldn't. I just hope you're not . . ." and she leaves off, shaking her head in frustration.

"Oh, Jesus," Martin says. "Not what? Did I say I'm giving up my vows? Did I?! I am having dinner with my oldest friend and her three children." Standing he adds, "Now if that's going to ruin your day, Mother, I don't know what to tell you. Too damn bad, I guess," and he lurches into the living room, the front door quickly banging shut behind him.

I'm not sure whether to stay or follow after Martin at this point, but I decide he's better off with a few minutes on his own. Also, I want to be sure I don't give in to the temptation of saying something helpful, like "Try to think of Mom, okay?" So I sit waiting for my English muffin to toast. Martin's collar is there on the table, and I touch at the silver snap, watching Tripod hobble into the room. He pauses and announces himself with an interrogative *mrrowp?* before brushing up

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against Federal's leg. "It's already over there," she says, jerking her head at his bowl.

Her eyes, I notice, are misty now, and she wipes her hands on her apron, looking rather glazed for a moment.

And suddenly she begins emptying dirty dishes and silverware from the main sink into the adjacent basin. Methodically, thoroughly, she sponges the sink in silence, finally plugging the drain and running warm water. She takes Martin's soiled collar from the table and squirts a few milky drops of Ivory liquid onto it. Watching her, I remember once reading that the stuff is used to simulate semen in porn films. And sitting there I wonder: How can a mother wish such a life on her son? Celibacy. Forever.

Last night Viv told me her father's problem is that he wants her to be his little girl forever, that he literally hates to see her grow up, and maybe that's also Federal's design—to make Martin always be her boy, to remain the preeminent woman in his life. No doubt she once hoped to manage me similarly, except that I learned to loosen the noose of those apron strings. Or so I tell myself.

As if in a trance now she begins soaking the soiled collar in the sink, gently scrubbing the fine linen weave, working in vain to make Martin hers again.

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ROBERT McDOWELL

The Neighborhood

The Incident

Somebody threw a dead rat on the porch,
Then left an unsigned letter saying
"Please
Clean up the yard before the rodents breed."

The former owner stopped by after work
To see the thing and calm the newlyweds.
With booted toe he moved the rat around
While telling them their neighbors meant no harm.
He said,
"It's just their civic pride, you know?"

The newlyweds said no, they didn't know.
At that the man bent down, grabbing the tail,
And flung the carcass through the evening air.

"That's that," he said. "The rain will break it down
In nothing flat."
"That's fine," Geneva said,
"But what about up here?" She tapped her head.

Her husband Johnnie came down off the steps
And kicked a clod of dirt across the grass.

"You never said we might have trouble here."

Simms yanked once on his double chin and snorted.
"You two kids got a deal. I'd best be going."

Geneva walked back in. The screen door creaked
As Simms climbed into his truck and drove away.

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A picture window's light-beige curtain stirred
Across the street, catching Johnnie's eye.
The curtain stilled itself, and Johnnie spat
Once toward that yard of perfect colored stones—
A desert or a beach instead of grass,
A California landscape from the fifties.
He thought of digging up those stones some night
To heap them in a pile just off the curb,
A modern mound of worship for their street;
To shake that image off he looked next door
And saw the stars and stripes at 402
Snap back and forth at the top of a tall white pole.
Each morning and every night they watched the man
Who lived there come outside and tend the flag.
A gesture to dead friends? A son he'd lost?
Geneva favored the latter, Johnnie the first,
But both agreed how weird the flagpole was.
The man was good with flowers, too, and grass,
His yard an odd, unwelcome throwback among
The gravel lawns, and here and there, to keep
The dogs away, a mason jar of water.
At least that's what they'd heard. As Johnnie watched,
A dog loped up and calmly peed on one.
The banner crisply snapped, a prophecy,
And Johnnie felt more sullen watching it.
He lowered the flag on their dented mailbox
And turning from his neighbors walked inside.

The Neighbor

. . . . Behind the curtain Harley picked his guitar,
Then pressed a can of beer against his cheek.
The room was stale with cigarettes, and half
A pizza hardened on the coffee table.
The tune he played was making him feel soft,
So he put the instrument aside, stood up,
And cursed the pretty boy across the street.
He thought of Geneva, too, how she had teased him

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The day they'd arrived in a sagging Ryder truck.
He had the arms and shoulders from lifting weights,
And all that afternoon he out-performed
The skinny guy whose wife kept watching him
And said he looked just like a TV wrestler.
He smiled at what he'd like to do with her.
He'd known her type, all lanky bones, blonde hair
And polish, with her nose up in the air.
A girl like that might do most anything
When she gets pushed around by the right guy.
He peeked around the curtain and saw Geneva
Behind the window in her living room.
He thought of her eyes, all far away and hazy,
As they would look when he was done with her.
He thought of calling, as he had before.
She'd just hung up at first but later listened,
His words and songs like tongues all over her.
So Harley told himself while calling often,
Willing her to wriggle free of ties
And come to him. After the second call,
He knew the phone would never be enough.
Not now, he told himself, *her husband's home.*
The thought of that tall blond boy holding her
In bed disgusted him.
"I'll punish you,"
He said, then licked his lips and turned away.

What Geneva Knows

The curtain fluttered, then was still. She glimpsed
The face and hands behind it and hugged herself,
And wished she hadn't smiled so much the day
That Harley crossed the street to help them out.
He crossed the street for you, she told herself,
And that thought made her cold. Was it the thought,
Repulsive and exciting all at once
That chilled her, or how she'd kept it to herself?

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She couldn't say, and that surprised her now.
She cursed herself and walked into the kitchen,
Imagining a lonely, hungry man
In sweaty darkness, writing songs for her.

You read my mind, he'd told her on the phone.
Oh, no, she'd said, but she listened just the same.

She pushed the thought away and looked for Johnnie,
Who leaned against the kitchen sink, a glass
Of water held steady in mid-air between
His mouth and the tap.
"You know," he said, "and so
Do I that Harley did it." The glass exploded
In his hand. A moment passed. He dropped a piece,
Then checked himself for cuts and grabbed a towel.

"The first new glass you've done that to," she said.
But neither of them laughed. The blood slowed down,
And Johnnie concentrated on the window.

"I ought to jam a piece in Harley's face."

"That's fine," Geneva said. "Run over so he
Can beat you up or pull a gun on you.
What are you looking at?" She hung the towel
On a hook to dry and turned her head to see.
"It's Cal," she said. They watched the old man labor
Beneath a floodlight, slowly working paint
Along a faded panel. Stooping low
To get up close, he worried each small stroke
(Each stroke a desperate stab, really) and followed
Them up with nervous swipes of his paint rag hand.

"I feel like talking to him," Johnnie said.

Geneva grabbed his arm to make him stay.
"For my sake keep Cal out of this," she said.
"Just look at him. The man is seventy-three!"

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"What I might say won't kill him," Johnnie said.
"It's fine for you to bend his ear for hours.
You're turning red. There's more to it, perhaps?
He likes to talk. Besides, your pride won't break."

She lowered her eyes as Johnnie pulled away,
And felt her privacy dissolving like
A cake of poison set out for the ants.
She heard the back door close, saw Johnnie cross
The garden to the RV parking lot.

"You got a minute, Cal?" she heard him shout.

The old man stopped and slowly turned around.
"Got more than that for you! Let's go inside.
It's warmer there. I've got a bottle, too."

Geneva watched the two men disappear,
Then hurried out to grab the ringing phone.
She paused, then said hello, but no one spoke.

"I love it when you sound all out of breath,"
A low voice said at last. "I see your man
Is over getting drunk with that old coot.
You thought about my plan?"
"You mean the one,"
Geneva said, "where you take me away
From all of this? What happens to your son?"

"Don't mind the kid. I'm talking true love here."

"You're talking garbage, Harley. Now give it up."

"You trying to say you were only leading me on?
Then what about the songs I made up for you,
The ones you listened to? You can't fool me."

"You've got to stop! I never led you on!
Were you the one who tossed the rat on the porch?"

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"What rat? Keep teasing me. It gets me hot.
It won't be long before you come to me.
I'll have to hurt you some, of course, but then
I'll put you on a pedestal. You'll see."

The line went dead. Geneva held the phone
To her ear, its tone the most consoling sound
She'd heard all day. The oven alarm went off.
She had a casserole to see about.

Cal's Story

Inside the trailer Johnnie complained about
The omen of the rat, his lousy job,
The neighbors who would just not let them be.
Cal listened, leaning forward on his knees,
His stomach hanging down like a balloon.

"It's Harley doing this," he said at last.
"That pretty gal of yours is in his blood.
He wants her. He wants to mess you up for fun.
It's no good blaming the neighborhood. Get through it,
Or pack your woman up and move along."
Cal filled his glass. "Don't look so put upon."

"Why not? I've got a wife with looks who aims
To plant herself but wants to live some, too.
Like everyone, she keeps things to herself.
We skipped through three bad rentals before we found
A place to buy. But I don't mean to whine.
You couldn't know what younger people today
Go through to settle in one place."
"I guess,"
Cal said. A look came over him that made
The younger man sit up and hold his breath,
But just as fast it disappeared as Cal
Rearranged his seat and breathed for both of them.

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"You see me as that nice old gent next door,"
He said, "a fat and balding grandpa type."
His guest put down his drink, began to speak,
But Cal held up one hand for silence.
"No need
To say it ain't that way. It's natural
You'd look at me and think I've always been
Like this. To youth old age looks permanent.
But fill your glass and put your feet up there.
I'm going to set you straight.
I was a cop,"
He said, and paused to watch the words take hold.
"In 1956, down south in Greenfield,
I shot and killed a boy under the bridge.
The kid was only fourteen, a runaway,
But hostile, big and sassy for his age.
He said he'd lived down there for months. I said
Come on. He said he didn't have a name.
His smart mouth set off something in my head,
So I made him spread his legs and eye the wall.
He did that much all right, then back-kicked up
And caught me solid, right between the legs.
I doubled up in pain and went down fast.
I saw him running, and then I took my gun out.
I squeezed off a harmless shot above his head
And hollered *Stop*. I thought of nothing else
But *Make that boy turn round*! And so I dropped him."

Cal paused to fill his glass, to study Johnnie
For a sign he'd gone too far. "Well, neighbor," he said,
"How sweet is my heart now?"
The young man squirmed,
The took a breath and asked what happened next.

"I checked his pulse and felt the weight of the thing
I'd done, as if some evil I had kept
In all my life had taken hold of me.
I faced the fear that everybody knows,

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That one day you'll break out and be the monster
You've always been. I fell down on the ground
And clawed at it until my fingers bled.
I even put the gun into my mouth,
But didn't have the guts to pull the trigger.
I climbed the hill to work the radio,
And moments later squad cars jammed the bridge.
An ambulance inched off with what was left.
They took my gun and drove me back to town,
Then kept me at the station most of the night.
When I got home my wife was waiting up,
And rocked me like a baby until dawn.

"The morning after, I felt hollowed out
Just lying on the couch and staring up.
My kids snuck through the back to go to school
Because out front reporters held the yard
And yelled for me to tell my side of it.
They kept it up all morning, too, till Riley
Braked his squad car inches from the porch.
They wanted me for further questioning,
But first he chuckled, describing how the jerks
Out front had scattered, fearing he'd run them down.
At that my wife got mad and had her say,
And while she was jawing Riley hung his head.
She wanted him to make it right somehow,
But what could he do? She didn't get the point—
Or didn't want to see—the politics
Of killing a star athlete, Mexican,
And honor student—all that with just one shot.
The mayor was catching hell from civic groups,
And Riley said the governor had called.

"You get the picture, Johnnie? Care to guess
How this old head made out?" Cal tapped his skull
And slowly moved into the trailer's shadows
Where Johnnie heard him rummaging through drawers.
He wondered what the old man was searching for,

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And as he looked around the cluttered room
At magazine stacks and Goodwill furniture,
Cal shuffled back and settled in his chair.

"I had a picture of me in uniform,
But where it is who knows."
"I'd like to see it,"
Johnnie said, and then in an edgy voice
That scared him to hear it, "Do you still own a gun?"

Cal shifted in his chair and gripped its arms.
"Not since that day have I had a piece in my hand.
Do you mind my asking why you'd want to know?"

The young man laughed and nervously scratched his neck.
"I don't know why. Just thought I might get one."

"What for? You want to do some target practice?"

The question sounded ridiculous to Johnnie,
But hearing it made him ask himself *what for*?
He knew, of course, and so did the old man
Who poured another shot into his glass,
Then capped the bottle and stood it on the floor.

"You know," he said at last, "I thought about
That kid a lot. What was he doing there,
And why the mouthing off? He should have been
At school, at church, or on the practice field."

Cal mentioning the practice field brought Johnnie back
To his own time. He coached a local team
With a game that night, but first he had to know.
"I'm running late," he said. "What happened, though?"

"They charged me with the killing, the trial was moved
Down south, and six months later I was free.
At least I thought I was. Back home I found
I couldn't just blend in as I had before.
The cat went out one night and disappeared.

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The yard was trashed, and letters threatened us.
It got to where the kids weren't safe at school,
And so one night we packed the car and left."

"You had to hate that town."

"Well, they hated me.
But I'm thirty years from there, my children gone,
My wife long dead . . . She gave up years ago."

Cal brought the bottle up for one more drink,
But Johnnie stood to go.
"We'll talk again
Real soon," he said, then couldn't think of words
To match the story he'd been told. He touched
The old man's shoulder, set down his glass and left.

Johnnie's Night

I didn't really have to leave right then,
But Cal unsettled me. We think we know
A person well, then stumble over news
We'd just as soon not know about. So I stop
Off at the pawn shop as a way to put
Some distance (I tell myself) between Cal's life
And what I'm up against. Next time a rat
Or other message winds up on my porch,
I'll have an answer for the messenger.

I hustle to Bailey Park and tell the kids
To break up into groups and toss some balls.
Tired fathers loosen ties and settle in
To cheer their boys and girls. Our pitcher, Wes,
Warms up along the third base line with Phil,
Our pudgy catcher who can scald the ball.

I think a manager should care enough
To make each kid feel like his only child.
God knows some fathers just don't give a damn.

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You take Luis. His old man's never seen
His ten-year-old play third, lay down a bunt,
Or take the extra base. He's poetry
In the field and at the plate because he works
At fundamentals. He stays late after practice
Until I have to yell at him to go.
He's never in a hurry to get home,
And little wonder, what with no one there
To cheer him on. Some kids whose dads don't show
At least have moms who come to every game.

There's Mrs. Britt, of course, who rags on me
Because I pull her Tommy off the field
And make him coach first base. The poor kid's got
Two hams for hands. Heredity, I guess.
And still I try to work the weak kids in,
An inning here and there while keeping in mind
We're here to play the game and win it, too.
I know some parents think me lenient,
Too soft when it comes to making winning moves.
Last week I left our pitcher in too long,
Then hugged him, after losing, while he wept.
His old man, blaming me, was just ashamed.
I'm not well liked.
I leave my battery
And walk out on the grass. Our coed dream,
Denise, efficiently shags flies. She gloves
A low line drive, then straightens up and hits
The cut-off man. I have to tell her that
I'm starting her tonight in place of Buck.
That's Harley's kid, who hasn't shown up yet.
I'll bet he's behind the grandstand goofing off,
Maybe drinking with his friends or toking up.
"A future lifer" . . . I've heard some call him that.

Buck's mean just like his daddy. Just for fun
He cut the laces on our batboy's glove
And laughed when I ordered him to buy a new one.
His daddy laughed, too, then told me where to go.

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Buck's cruel to everyone. When Denise signed up,
He told her to report to every practice
With food for the boys. I put a stop to that,
And still he pushed. He kept on razzing her
Until the night I caught him with his cronies
Trying to strip her in the parking lot.

"Let's see the color of your shorts!" he screamed.

I came up fast behind him like a hook
And shook him by the neck. His pals ran off.
Denise hitched up her pants and grabbed a bike.
I held the boy until she was out of sight,
Then muscled him to my car and drove him home.

My story didn't sit well with his dad,
Who stood as if he were posing on the porch.

"What'd you expect? The game and girls don't mix.
If two boys had a beef and slugged it out,
You'd break it up and drop it. So what's your point?"
He pointed past my shoulder toward my house.
"How long before you trim those Chinese plums?
Just look at how their branches hang so low!
Your neighbors hit their heads, the plums fall down,
Then others come along and step on them.
Your sidewalk looks as if some girls had done
A wine dance on it. You could just top those trees,
You know. Hell, you could even chop them down.
I've got a Black and Decker, I'll do it for you."

I looked across the street at the three trees,
Their branches heavy, plums setting up like blisters.
I thought of popping them with a sewing needle
And opening my mouth in time to catch
Their sweet release, an idle thing a boy
Might do in summer, on a Saturday.
I hadn't done a thing like that in years,
And as I stood there, drifting, I felt old.

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I forced myself to get back to the point.
I told him I was there about the boy.
He looked like he might hit me. Instead, he laughed.

"I'd rather talk about your wife," he said.

My face got hot, the color of my trees,
And I was going to ask him what he meant
When she walked up behind me, touched my arm.

"It's late," she said. "Our dinner's getting cold."

She seemed to be looking past me as she spoke,
Though not at Harley, and at nothing I could see.
I noticed Buck on guard behind the screen;
The look he trained on us stood my neck hair up,
So I took Geneva's arm and crossed the street.
We didn't turn around when Harley yelled

"You'd better cut those trees before too long!"

*

So tonight, expecting trouble, I named the line-up,
And Buck cut loose with words that froze them all,
Then fired his glove against Denise's face.
Before the rest of us could move, she was on him;
Soon Buck was weeping, scrambling into the stands
Where Harley dropped his beer and shook the boy,
Then shouted his hatred down on all of us.

The umpire's voice was louder. He shouted *Let's Go,*
And the team responded. We huddled. They took the field,
Then took the ballgame, too, and afterwards
Some parents and I drove the kids to Pizza Hut.
We ordered a Deluxe, and it was nine
Before I called Geneva. The phone just rang,
Which made me uneasy; she wasn't going out.
I headed back to the table, took a seat,
And watched five minutes of a silent short—
The Keystone Kops—on a small, cracked screen above

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The booth across from us. In the part I saw
A man was trying to break into a house
By climbing through a second story window
From a tree. But when the branch snapped off
The man was in trouble, dangling from the ledge.
His flailing legs exaggerated the fix
He was in. The Kops showed up and waited below;
A girl looked out the window, clutching her throat.

My back went straight, for despite the faded print,
The melodramatic gestures of the girl,
The actress was a ringer for Geneva.
She disappeared, then came back with a broom
To slap at the man's hands until he fell
And flattened the ring of clown police below.
The chase began, and I was on my feet.
I dropped a wad of cash down by my Coke;
I told the kids, "*Be Happy*," and I ran.

Home Late

The drive through town was freeze framed in his mind.
At every corner Johnnie hit a light.
He told himself his fear was irrational
And tried to laugh it off, then almost struck
A car emerging from a parking lot.
At last he turned the corner to his street,
And the darkness of his house a block away
Arranged the guilt and anger that were forming
In his brain. *Too late*, he thought. He should have been
home.
And as the car got closer he could see
The mutilated limbs of the Chinese plums
All scattered on the sidewalk and the yard.

He pushed the pedal to the floor and braked
So hard the tires put down a blackened streak
Along the concrete drive. From under the seat
He pulled the pawn shop purchase out of its case.
The pistol shook in his hand as Johnnie glanced

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At Harley's blacked out house across the street,
And in that darkness saw his future changed
Forever by caprice. How foolish then
To think he'd bested Harley at the game,
To think the neighborhood would let them be.

Afraid of what he'd find, he leaned against
The washroom windowsill, the hall beyond
The door foreboding in its emptiness,
His need to know running counter to his wish
That all inside would be just as it was,
A wife he cherished, a repetition of hours
They'd shaped to a hard won, mutual design.
To Johnnie's surprise, the chaos he might find
Prevented him from moving; he had to, though,
And struggling to fight it off, as he knew he must,
He heard the sounds of scuffling in the house.
If he would not go in, his altered life
Might spill out on its own. He charged inside.

The Pieces

The kitchen floor was slippery with glass,
And as he sprinted through he nearly tripped.
In the next room, his favorite chair lay on its side.
Geneva lay there, too; she was half-undressed,
With Harley pressing, grinding down on her.
Geneva saw her husband first. She rolled
Her head to the side, exposing one eye bruised
And nearly swollen shut, and in that look
Between them was all the loss they'd ever known.
A time for thinking carefully had passed,
And Johnnie squeezed a shot out of the gun
That chipped the plaster wall.
"You can't shoot me."
As Harley spoke he got up on his feet
And glared at Johnnie. Geneva scrambled away.
"You'll be the one who ends up in a cell.
I'll tell the cops she threw herself at me.

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They'll write you off, a sorry, jealous slob
Who can't keep his wife in line. So put it down."
When Johnnie hesitated, Harley dove
For the gun, which dropped and slid into the hall
As the two men grappled on the yard sale rug.
"You had your chance. I'm gonna finish you,"
Said Harley, smashing Johnnie's head on the floor.
A sound exploded, and Johnnie saw the scowl
On Harley's face wash out. Geneva screamed
As Harley's body slumped and rolled on its side.
Cal crossed the room, prepared to fire again,
But Harley wouldn't need another one.

"I put that low to make it hurt," Cal said,
Then dropped the gun and helped Geneva up.
"It took me thirty years to make it right,"
He said to no one, "and yet it's never right.
Somebody better work the telephone."

Moving Day, Geneva

As I was boxing up the glasses and plates,
A thought came over me, a thought so strong
I couldn't do a thing but follow it.
I carefully unwrapped each glass I'd packed
And smashed them in the corner by the stove.
I'm sure I wrecked most every glass we owned,
And by the time my energy ran low
I felt such pure release I saw it all.
I heard again the chainsaw revving up
And saw myself run out to make him stop.
He sneered and just kept hacking at those trees,
Then quickly forced me back inside the house.
I saw his face again, the way he smiled
Before he slapped me, knocking me off my feet.
I saw him over me and closing in,
Could feel again the angles of his body
Cutting into mine.

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And Harley succeeded.
He got into my mind, convincing me,
As I lay under him, that I was dead,
A doll with mouths and huge blank eyes for him.

It came to me, as I threw the glasses down,
That Harley had me cornered from the start;
Out in the street, or talking on the phone,
Some hunters never give their game a rest.
I felt him all around me, even here.
So that was what had played me while I thought
That Johnnie and I were building, settling in.
Without the grace of neighbors you're alone,
Just waiting for the hunter to appear.
And when he comes he'll gut and skin you clean—
You'll wind up on a slab. Cal spared us that,
The man who just like Harley *was* our street.
All through his trial he didn't seem to care
That he might do some time. It bothered me.
I thought I should know just who he'd acted for.
Was it me, or Johnnie? Was it anyone?
The only thing Cal told me was he'd lost
His case before he'd known the three of us.
Those words confused me, though Johnnie understood.

I got the broom, swept up the mess I'd made
And put it in the trash. I walked outside
Where Johnnie was loading boxes on the truck.
I thought of little steps, the moves we make,
The grind of getting up and lying down,
The swift, sporadic joys inside of that.
What difference would it make where we would go?
I saw that the sorry yard would overcome
What little we had done to harness it.
I turned to Johnnie then, who helped me up.
We didn't speak but worked in that urgent way
That couples do when words won't mean a thing.
The curtain in Harley's picture window was gone.

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WENDELL BERRY

Duality

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

I

To love is to suffer—did I
know this when I first
asked you for your love?
I did not. And yet until
I knew, I could not know what
I asked, or gave. I gave
a suffering that I took: yours
and mine, mine when yours;
and yours I have feared most.

II

What can bring us past
this knowledge, so that
you never will wish our life
undone? For if ever you
wish it so, then I must wish
so too, and lovers yet unborn,
whom we are reaching toward
with love, will turn to this
page, and find it blank.

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III

I have feared to be unknown
and to offend—I must speak,
then, against the dread
of speech. What if, hearing,
you have no reply, and soul's
despair annul the body's hope?
Life in time may justify
any conclusion, whenever
our will is to conclude.

IV

Look at me now. Now,
after all the years, look at me
who have no beauty apart
from what we two have made
and been. Look at me
with the look that anger
and pain have taught you,
the gaze in which nothing
is guarded, nothing withheld.

V

You look at me, you give
a light, which I bear and return,
and we are held, and all
our time is held, in this
touching look—this touch
that, pressed against the touch
returning in the dark,
is almost sight. We burn
and see by our own light.

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VI

Eyes looking into eyes looking
into eyes, touches that see
in the dark, remember Paradise,
our true home. God's image
recalls us to Itself. We move
with motion not our own,
light upon light, day and
night, sway as two trees
in the same wind sway.

VII

Let us come to no conclusion,
but let our bodies burn
in time's timelessness. Heaven
and earth give us to this night
in which we tell each other of
a Kingdom yet to come, saying
its secret, its silent names.
We become fleshed words, one
another's uttered joy.

VIII

In the soul's fleshship joined,
we come to the resurrection
of words; they rise up
in our mouths, set free
of taints, errors, and bad luck.
In their new clarities
the leaf brightens, the air
clears, the syllables of water are
clear in the dark air as stars.

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IX

We come, unsighted, in the dark,
to the great feast of lovers
where nothing is withheld.
That we are there we know
by touch, by inner sight.
They too are here, who by
their giving take, by taking
give, who by their living
love, and by loving live.

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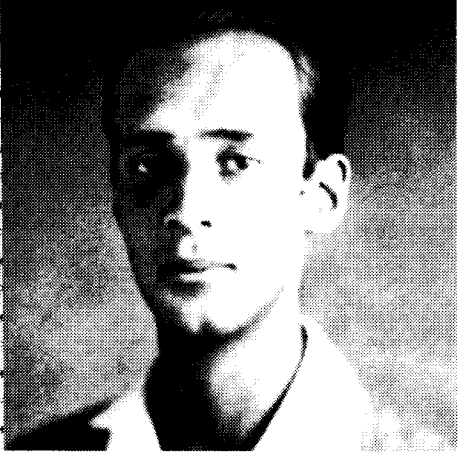

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BERT CARDULLO

Rites of Passage

YAABA IS THE SECOND FEATURE FILM by Idrissa Ouédraogo, a thirty-five-year-old native of the West African country of Burkina Faso (north of Ghana, and formerly known as Upper Volta),[1] and is set in a village not far from where the director grew up. Like Claire Denis's cinematic style in her recent *Chocolat*, Ouédraogo's style fits the unhurried rhythm of life in rural West Africa as well as the vastness and naked beauty of the land: for the most part he eschews the close-up and the quick cut for medium-to-long shots and loving, luxuriating pans of the landscape. Like other realist filmmakers, Ouédraogo repeatedly employs *temps mort*, or "dead time," as a way of remaining in, or returning to, a real world momentarily bereft of his characters and their story, as a way of juxtaposing the neat fiction he has created against the mysterious and unconstrained setting in which it takes place. Furthermore, Ouédraogo undercuts his fiction, his plot or fable, by giving over screen time to a "description" of the way the people live in their mud-and-thatch-hut village—how they cook, eat, wash, dress, play, fight, love, work, and travel. In this the director seems to be obeying the dictates of Cesare Zavattini's ideal realistic cinema, in which the job of screenwriter would disappear, stories would consequently be absolutely minimal, and

> all we have to do is to discover and then show all the elements that go to create [a basic activity in life, such as an ordinary woman's trip to the store to buy a pair of shoes], in all their banal "dailiness," and it will become worthy of attention, it will even become "spectacular." But it will become spectacular not through its exceptional, but through its *normal* qualities . . . No other medium of expression has the cinema's original and innate capacity for showing things, that we believe worth showing, as they happen day by day . . . As the cinema's responsibility comes from its enormous power, it should try to make every frame count, by which I mean that it should penetrate more and more into the manifestations and the essence

[1] Burkina Faso has produced at least two other directors whose films have attracted an audience outside Africa: Gaston Kaboré, whose *The Gift of God* (1982), like *Yaaba*, is the story of an African childhood; and Med Hondo, whose *Sarraounia* (1986) is an epic about tribal warfare as well as combat against colonial expansionism.

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> of reality. . . . The moral, like the artistic, problem lies in being able to observe reality, not to extract fictions from it.[2]

But Ouédraogo's aim is neither Zavattini's socially concerned one—to place the emphasis in films on the lives, and problems, of working people in Western industrial society—nor Denis's politically reflective one—to mark the transition in *Chocolat* from the government of her native French Cameroons to that of the African Republic of Cameroon. Rather, it is to create an initiation rite of mythic significance for his countrymen, and to do so not through the classic story of a boy who risks his life to save his people from the enemy, as in *Pathfinder*, the new film set in Lapland, but through the unfamiliar tale of a boy who risks his standing in the community to defend the "enemy"—an ancient pariah who lives on the outskirts of the village and is believed to be a witch—from his people.

As Pier Paolo Pasolini, among others, has maintained, the cinema is a vehicle far more suited to the transmission of myth than either poetry or prose because its images can reproduce physical reality at the same time that they are larger than life; because, like myths, dreams, and fairy tales, film can move fluidly through time and space and shift emotional tones just as fluidly; and because, even as myth exists both outside and inside history and arrives at universals through particulars, so does the cinema transcend a national language of words by means of the international language of images and transform the reality of those images into an iconography of the human psyche. Where children are concerned, two myths predominate on film: that of the original innocence of children, an innocence that only becomes sullied by contact with the society of grown-ups; and that of the child-as-father-to-the-man, of childhood as prelude to the main event of adulthood. Among films of the first kind, Benoit-Levy's *La Maternelle* (1932), Duvivier's *Poil de Carotte* (1932), Daquin's *Portrait of Innocence* (1941), and Grede's *Hugo and Josephine* (1967) deserve special mention. Among films of the second kind, the recent *My Life as a Dog* and *Pelle the Conqueror* are now joined by *Yaaba* and *Pathfinder*, two works whose mythic quality stands out all the more for its association with a "primitive" society, that is, one unencumbered by the baggage of modern history and uncluttered by the artifacts of modern culture.

Yaaba opens on a timeless image of youth, of youthful friendship that will blossom into courtship: the twelve-year-old boy Bila chases Nopoko, his cousin of the same age, diagonally through the expanse of the frame, unaccompanied by sound. But after the credits and the

[2] Cesare Zavattini, "Some Ideas on the Cinema," in *Film: A Montage of Theories*, ed. by Richard Dyer MacCann (New York, 1966), pp. 220–221. "Some Ideas on the Cinema" was originally published in English in *Sight and Sound*, NS 23, No. 2 (Oct.–Dec. 1953), pp. 64–69.

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introduction of sound, in the form of Francis Bebey's driving yet nimble rhythms (heard sporadically throughout, as a kind of musical embodiment of the persistent-yet-relaxed quality of the villagers), we find Bila and Nopoko at the grave of her mother, whom she says she misses and whose flowers she waters. In the background of this two-shot we see an old and weather-beaten woman whose real name is Sana but whom these children call Yaaba (grandmother in the local Moorish language). Yaaba was long ago declared a witch and driven out of the village, solely because her mother had died in childbirth and her father had died shortly thereafter from grief; now, whenever the village has troubles, such as the granary fire in an upcoming scene, Yaaba is conveniently blamed for them. Bila becomes her advocate, partly because she is innocent as well as defenseless, partly out of a need to assert his inchoate manhood (especially to Kongri, his domineering father), and partly because he sees a wisdom and a purity in the isolated Yaaba's stoical silence. Before his relationship with Nopoko can resume unhindered (a relationship that apparently will not be affected, in so sparsely populated an area, by their close blood ties), before Nopoko gets another mother through the remarriage of her father, Tibo, Bila must honor and serve his Yaaba—with protection against stone-throwing boys, with a rooster on which she dines and a bowl of goat's milk that she drinks, with the offer to rebuild her shack after arsonists burn it down, with his company for the remainder of her life and his vigilance over her body in death.

That death is no sentimental affair—it's a mythic one. Yaaba clearly dies of old age, but we don't *see* her die, gasping for her last breath, as we would in most films; we see only the aftermath, when Bila and Nopoko, who have come with food for Yaaba, find her dead near the ruins of her shack. Ouédraogo's shooting of this scene is a model of the restraint and reflection he has shown throughout the film: in long shot, his camera picks up and slowly pans with the two children as they walk from the right of the screen to the left, where Yaaba's body comes into the picture. Then in full shot, with tears in his eyes, Bila covers up the old woman and sends Nopoko to fetch their friend Noaga, the village drunk as well as its resident cuckold, who digs Yaaba's grave and lovingly places her in it (thereby redeeming or resurrecting himself). For the burial, the camera has moved from full shot back to long shot and there it stays for the remainder of the scene, thus placing the emphasis not on the emotions of the participants, the expression of their sorrow, but on the social significance of the event, on its ritualistic quality, which is underlined by the cleansing of themselves that Bila, Nopoko, and Noaga perform immediately afterwards at a nearby water hole.

Yaaba has died, but in dying she has figuratively given life to Bila, given birth to Bila the man, who resumes his chase after Nopoko—the chase with which the film began—at the end, this time with added significance. Yaaba has died alone, but Bila and Nopoko will live on

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together and help to ensure the survival of their people and their village (whose procreative activity—between Bila's mother and father, between Noaga's wife, Koudi, and her boyfriend, Razougon—is benignly watched over by an anonymous man, a kind of choral figure, who always responds to the sounds of lovemaking with the words "Ah, that's life"). Nopoko herself has literally been given life by Yaaba: after becoming deathly ill from a knife wound incurred during a fight between Bila and three boys (one of whom Bila had beaten earlier for throwing stones at Yaaba), Nopoko was saved by medicine that the old woman had traveled far to procure from kindly "Taryam, the great healer" (who contrasts with the village's own ineffectual and opportunistic medicine man). An orphan nearly from birth, a social outcast all her life, with no husband or children of her own, Yaaba has died a grand mother.

There are no professional actors in *Yaaba*—only local villagers were used—which affirms yet again something Vernon Young said years ago, that "film criticism can usually afford to disregard actors in a film's total effect, unless they are grossly bad or overwhelmingly good."[3] Film criticism can so proceed because, in general, the performance, the acting of the words, is not the thing; more so than acting onstage, acting on film is part of a larger picture that depends for its effect on its cinematographic rendering—how it is photographed and edited and even scored. And that larger picture includes the *faces* of actors, from which, without benefit of words, the camera can elicit character in a way that the stage obviously cannot (hence one of the beauties of silent film). For an example of what I mean, watch the "performance" of Sanga Fatimata as Yaaba: she doesn't speak much, but she moves us by her paradoxically gnarled yet frail presence, by the photographing of that presence as it gracefully moves through the landscape of Ouédraogo's narrative. Like the rest of the cast, Fatimata is neither overwhelmingly good nor grossly bad because she's not really acting, she's *being*; she's allowing the camera to penetrate into the essence of her reality far more than she is presenting to that camera a reality framed by words. And she is well served, as are all the villagers, by the cinematography of Matthias Kalin and Jean Monsigny, which makes no attempt to prettify, to gloss over, the humble conditions under which these West Africans live, or, conversely, to make those conditions appear more abject than they are. The color brown predominates, but it never bores or depresses because, with the help of brilliant sunlight, the cinematographers manage to capture its every shade—on faces, on clothing, on huts, and on the ground. Kalin and Monsigny could not help but capture the vast blue sky under which the villagers live, and which seems to me to magnify rather than diminish the significance of what transpires beneath it.

[3] See my edition of *The Film Criticism of Vernon Young* (Lanham, Maryland, 1990), p. xvi.

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Blue dominates the images of *Pathfinder* as well, but it is the blue tinge of a land suffused with cold and blanketed with snow: Lapland, or to be precise, the northern parts of Norway, Sweden, and Finland, far above the Arctic Circle. The very first shots of this film are of the land, the air, the snow—pristine and beautiful yet remorseless, and therefore uninhabitable by all except the hardiest of folk. The Lapps, naturally, are those folk, and *Pathfinder* recounts a thousand-year-old Lapp legend that first-time director Nils Gaup heard from his grandfather. This is the first feature to be made in the Lapp language (a member of the Finno-Ugric group of languages, which includes Finnish and Estonian), and it's also the first Norwegian film to be shot in 70 millimeter—not that 35-millimeter Norwegian films are familiar to American viewers.[4] The cinematographer Erling Thurmann-Andersen clearly used the wider film gauge in order to capture the effect of living amidst the snowy vastness of Lapland, to take in as much of the frozen landscape as possible, but since he was shooting a movie about man-adapted-to-the-elements, not oppressed by them, he includes a fair portion of medium-to-close shots of *people*, themselves enlarged in 70 millimeter, and engaged in a mythic struggle for survival less with the land than with each other—in this case, the Lapps against the Tchudes, roving bandits who, historically, came out of northwestern Russia to prey on small, peaceful Lapp settlements of hunters and their families.

Gaup, who, like Idrissa Ouédraogo, wrote as well as directed *Pathfinder*, makes the invading Tchudes all the more terrifying by having them speak a language (created especially for this film) that is never subtitled, by dressing them in black, by shooting only their feet trampling the snow upon their initial appearance, by not having them take any spoils, which makes their violent behavior seem gratuitous, and by juxtaposing their malice with cutaways to a single bird in flight. There are about ten such cutaways interspersed throughout the film, and they remind us both of the Lapps' vulnerability—unlike the bird, they can flee the Tchudes only by land, which is to say in the same breath that they will be relentlessly pursued—and of their spiritual transcendence, their ability to soar above their straitened circumstances through love of family (especially children), devotion to tribe, and pantheistic reverence for Nature, for the invisible bonds that tie all the phenomena of the material world together in infinite fellowship. The Lapps have a *noaidi*, or shaman, named Raste to remind them of those invisible bonds and the Lapps' obligation to preserve them, and thus themselves, by fleeing in the face of the Tchudes' senseless onslaught.

[4] I'm familiar with only six such productions: *Edvard Munch* (1974, dir. by Peter Watkins, an Englishman), *Wives* (1975, dir. by Anja Breien, who followed it with *Wives, Ten Years After* in 1985), *Little Ida* (1981, dir. by Laila Mikkelsen), *Witch Hunt* (1981, dir. by Anja Breien), and *Orion's Belt* (1985, dir. by Ola Solum).

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The opening shots of *Pathfinder*, as described above, depict a peopleless, snow-covered terrain bound invisibly to vast, blue skies, and these shots are immediately followed by a scene of Raste alone, in close-up, in a fire-lit hut, singing a folk song. Only after this pre-credit sequence (and, of course, the credits themselves) does the film proper, for which it has set the tone, begin. That tone is disrupted at once by the aforementioned close shot of black, enemy boots tramping in the snow, on the way to their first act of destruction. The Tchudes kill a dog, then slaughter the isolated family to which it belongs—father, mother, and young daughter; after setting fire to the victims' home, the Tchudes unceremoniously drop their bodies headfirst into a hole they've cut in the ice over a pond. This "burial" is witnessed from afar by the family's sixteen-year-old son, Aigin, who has just returned on skis from a hunting trip and who, in his horror and grief, accidentally gives his position away. Wounded in the arm by a Tchude arrow, he manages to elude his pursuers and make his way across the countryside to a large settlement, where he warns his fellow Laplanders and tries to get them to stand up to the invaders. With the exception of Raste (who helps to heal Aigin's arm, admires the boy's bravery, and forges a kind of bond with him) and three other men, however, the peace-loving Lapps elect to evacuate their families to the coast, where an even larger settlement awaits them. The band of five meets the enemy and all but Aigin are killed—Raste in particularly gruesome fashion after he refuses to reveal either the location of the hiding Aigin or the destination of the fleeing Lapps, and even after the teenager has come forward and agreed, in return for Raste's life, to be the Tchudes' "pathfinder," their guide through narrow, icy, misty mountain passes that lead down to the main Lapp settlement by the shore.

Instead of leading the enemy to his people, however, Aigin tricks them so that they all plunge to their deaths from a precarious ledge; he himself barely survives as one Tchude after another tries to use his fellows to stop his fall down the craggy mountainside. Before being welcomed by the relieved Lapp villagers below (among whom Sahve, his first and only love, loyally waits), Aigin has a vision of the reindeer bull, the same wild and noble animal that Raste had seen only three times during his life—in his youth, in his prime, and in his old age—and whose strength and savvy all Lapps admire, just as they admire those of the great bear Darffrot (whom they were able to hunt down only after years of trying). An old woman greets the returned Aigin with the words "We'll always have a pathfinder," and it is clear that, with Raste's incantatory drum now in his possession, the visionary lad has become the moral if not the spiritual leader of his people, the man who will chart their course through life. The last shot in the film is of that drum, and it follows an overhead shot of Aigin uniting with his people around a fire.

The quiet, almost mystical tone of *Pathfinder*'s pre-credit sequence

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has been restored, and with it the Lapps' relaxed communion in the midst of a Nature so stark that it seems to reinforce that communion rather than disturb it. The Lapps are hunters, not warriors, and now, after Aigin's defeat of the Tchudes, they are free to resume their (happy) struggle for survival with the land and its animals. The action part of this action film—in which Gaup can make room for the insistent, symbolic cutaways to the bird but, understandably, never for *temps mort*—is over; what's left, as in the slower-moving but equally gripping *Yaaba*, is the anticipated union of a boy-become-man and the girl he loves, a union made possible in good measure by the sacrifice of a spiritual leader. What's left, in other words, is the life of the tribe, which has been extended through the quasi-ritualistic sacrifice of one of its older members and the simultaneous maturation of one of its younger ones.

Like Idrissa Ouédraogo, Nils Gaup has cast two of his relatives in the roles of the boy and the girl: Mikkel Gaup as Aigin and Sara Marit Gaup as Sahve. (I do not know their precise relation to the director; Rasmané and Noufou Ouédraogo, who played Bila and Nopoko in *Yaaba*, are Idrissa Ouédraogo's cousins.) In their naturalness and understatement, these two appear to be non-professionals (as do most of the supernumeraries in the cast), whereas the actors who play the mysterious Raste and the villainous leader of the Tchudes are clearly professionals: although they don't say much, each *visually* embellishes his role, each creates a character out of gesture, look, and movement. The mix of professionals and non-professionals works—the ingenuousness of the one group gets played off against the ingenuity of the other—and everyone receives support from the music of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, Marius Müller, and Kjetil Bjerkestrand, which manages to create conventional suspense and sentiment without itself being overly conventional. When I see small gems like *Pathfinder* and *Yaaba*—the products of modest national cinemas—I think of our own immodest cinema and all the money it spends each year on large duds (I mean artistic duds, which more often than not turn out to be box-office successes!). Our cinema has always functioned in this way; that is why it properly calls itself "the industry"; and that is why most of its products are disposable. This situation isn't going to change, but it's nice to dream, to be reminded by small, faraway lands of the large possibilities—some would say responsibilities—inherent in film art.

Those possibilities are turned to comic ends in Etienne Chatiliez's ironically titled first feature, *Life Is a Long Quiet River*. This film has childhood as one of its subjects, but it's childhood in the "civilized" society of contemporary France, and it's childhood complicated by psychological questions rather than resolved by mythic answers. "Which plays the greater role in the formation of character," Chatiliez and his co-scenarist, Florence Quentin, begin by asking, "nature or nurture, heredity or environment?" Knowing that their audience would probably respond, "Both play equal roles," Chatiliez and

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Quentin proceed to give us a mordant comedy in which both do exactly that. In the process, the question becomes, not whether heredity or environment plays the greater role in the character-formation of children, but whether a carefree lower-class life is preferable to a straitened haut-bourgeois one.[5] On the evidence of *Life Is a Long Quiet River*, one would have to answer, "Yes," and that is the film's satirical point—one that may be none too realistic, but that nevertheless doesn't lapse into sentiment because the lower-class family is filled, not with honest, workaday types, but with drunks, slobs, sluts, truants, and petty thieves!

The Le Quesnoys are a parody of the perfect haut-bourgeois family: the father is the snobbish head of the electric company in Lille (about 130 miles northeast of Paris) and the careful regulator of his children's social as well as domestic activities; the mother is the maid-assisted and charity-minded head of her well-appointed home, where she always looks her best and puts on the best of faces; the five children are clean-scrubbed and well-behaved, and receive a traditional Roman Catholic education under the guidance of their saccharine parish priest. The Groseilles, by contrast, are a parody of the worst sort of welfare family: instead of working, the father wiles away the day drinking, smoking, and playing cards; instead of taking care of the family's cramped and cluttered apartment, the mother sits around stuffing her face, watching game shows on television, and dyeing her hair garish colors; left to fend for themselves, the six children lie, cheat, and steal their way through each day under the disapproving eye of their downstairs neighbor, an Algerian grocer who, despite the Groseilles' racist taunts, runs the tab that keeps them alive.

Why are the Groseilles to be preferred over the Le Quesnoys? Because they obviously lack pretension, because they are who they are and seek no religious justification (or any other kind, for that matter) for the lives they lead. Also because, when Monsieur and Madame Groseille learn that twelve years earlier a nurse—angry because her obstetrician-lover abandoned her on Christmas Eve to go home to his wife—switched the name tags on the two babies he had just delivered, thus giving them a Le Quesnoy boy and the Le Quesnoys a Groseille girl, their only concern is to hand the boy over to the Le Quesnoys (to whom the nurse also reveals the switch, which she blames on the doctor's drunkenness and which she uses to ruin his reputation after he refuses, upon the death of his wife, to move in with her) in return for 20,000 francs. Sentiment plays no part in the Groseilles' decision, for either the boy, Momo, or their natural daughter, Bernadette; they just want the money, and after they spend it all, they blackmail

[5] For a film that unsuccessfully contrasts different sections of modern French society at the same time that it feebly attempts to supply a political context for its social comedy, see—or rather don't see—Louis Malle's foolish *May Fools*.

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Monsieur Le Quesnoy into giving them more in exchange for neither laying claim to Bernadette (whom they've made no attempt to see, and whom the Le Quesnoys dutifully wish to keep) nor revealing to the girl her true parentage. (It is Momo who eventually reveals to Bernadette the identity of her biological family, from whom she flees in fright the first and only time she gets a look at them!)

The Groseilles, then, are immoral but amiable, and they stay that way—even Momo, who began the film as their most refined member (an example of heredity at work) yet ends it without having shed their raffish influence over him (an example of environment at work), despite his attraction to life with the Le Quesnoys (it is to their home that he finally returns after one in a continuing series of visits back to the Groseille apartment). The Le Quesnoys for their part are moral but magisterial, and they do anything but stay that way—by the end of the film, their oldest son, Paul, is having an affair with the Groseilles' oldest daughter, the slatternly Roselyne; their other sons can be found sniffing glue in the garage with the Groseille boys; their unmarried maid, Marie-Thérèse, is miraculously pregnant (she says she's never even had a date with a man, let alone slept with one!); Madame Le Quesnoy is having a nervous breakdown, from which she seeks relief in alcohol; Monsieur Le Quesnoy can think of nothing but having sex with his ailing wife; and Bernadette, who began the film, paradoxically, as both the crassest and the most pretentious member of the Le Quesnoy family, ends it by declaring herself an orphan, since she is unable to reconcile the dueling influences on her character.

Life has indeed been anything but a long, quiet river for the Le Quesnoys, despite the fact that Chatiliez has shot their and the Groseilles' story from a relatively long, quiet distance. Comedy calls for an objective, contemplative stance on the part of its author and audience, hence Chatiliez has given us mostly medium-to-full shots, plus an occasional long shot; has had his cinematographer, Pascal Lebegue, imbue the images with an almost wan color; and has conveyed to his cast that comic acting does not mean overacting. Intimacy and empathy are not the point here, as the very first sequence of the film shows: the Algerian grocer, Hamed, discusses produce with a customer on the street, then they both go inside his store; meanwhile, the camera moves from full to long shot and the car that was parked in front of Hamed's grocery blows up. A bomb has exploded, yet no one has been hurt, and the distance of Chatiliez's camera has foretold that no one would be hurt. That bomb is a metaphor for the action to follow, that shooting style a measure of how to contain it. The last shot of the film is of waves breaking gently onto a beach, to which the camera has panned from the porch of the calculating nurse, Josette, and her now captive lover, Dr. Mavial, who look out to the sea as they quietly sip their drinks.

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RICHARD HORNBY

Performing the Classics

THE JEAN COCTEAU REPERTORY COMPANY, WHICH IS CELEBRATING its twentieth season in New York, is unusual among American theatre groups in that it tries to do the classics well rather than do them ingeniously. Antonin Artaud, the mad Frenchman who has had so much influence on our theatre in the last few decades, wanted to "put an end to the subjugation of the theatre to the text," a wish that has come all too true. Our directors now adapt, update, and otherwise "alter" (a more appropriate term than they realize) the classics so frequently and casually that it is rare anymore to see a production that is true to its original script.

Jean Cocteau, Artaud's contemporary and a fellow surrealist, had a much saner view of theatre. Like Artaud, he rejected the traditional view of French intellectuals that the stage was merely a transmitter of literary masterpieces, calling instead for "a poetry of the theatre," which would recognize the artistic validity of all the elements of production, including acting, scenery, and costumes, but not excluding the text. After all, in addition to speeches, playscripts do contain stage directions; Cocteau recognized that effective playwrights operate through all the theatre arts rather than just through dialogue.

This past fall, the Cocteau Repertory performed one of their namesake's own plays, *The Infernal Machine*, in rotation with Ibsen's last play, *When We Dead Awaken*. The staging of both was simple and lucid, yet stylish and imaginative, while the acting ranged from competent to brilliant. *The Infernal Machine* is a 1934 retelling of the Oedipus myth, giving it a modern cynicism and fatalism. Cocteau's Oedipus is a shallow, ambitious charmer, a prototype for the many dictators that have plagued the twentieth century. The play starts much earlier than Sophocles' version, with the encounter with the Sphinx, who has taken on the guise of a naive and star-struck young girl. Oedipus is so pompous and stupid that she has to tip him off on the answer to her riddle; he then vaingloriously enters Thebes, marries Jocasta, and rules the city for seventeen years, only to be dragged down by the plague, which, as with Sophocles, brings about revelations about his true parentage, the suicide of Jocasta, and his own self-blinding.

In short, *The Infernal Machine* is a rewritten version of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, rather than an adaptation of it. The distinction may seem minor, but it is in fact crucial. Most plays throughout history

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have used prior literary works as their sources; we do not fault Shakespeare's *Hamlet* for not being "true" to its source (probably written by Thomas Kyd), because Shakespeare's version is actually a brand-new play. For that matter, Sophocles did not invent the Oedipus myth, either. T. S. Eliot once remarked that bad poets borrow, while good ones steal; the same is true in the theatre, where with bad playwrights (or, more often, bad directors) the play seems to be at odds with its source, while good playwrights convert the source into something totally their own. *The Infernal Machine* depends in part for its effect on our knowledge of Sophocles' play, but would stand perfectly well on its own for someone who had never even heard of Sophocles, and makes its contemporary points in an honest, aboveboard manner. In contrast, the problem with most "updated" productions of the classics is that they do not update their sources *enough*. Neither faithful to the original nor to some consistent modern viewpoint, they make us all too aware of the source and the production as two separate things.

The designs for *The Infernal Machine* were spare and evocative. Robert Joel Schwartz did wonderful things with a platform and a few streamers against a background of black drapes, while Gregory Gale's costumes combined an Egyptian jackal-headed god, French Legionnaires' uniforms, and 1930s designer dresses in an amazingly coherent "poetry of the theatre." The acting, however, was less felicitous than the visual elements; Mark Waterman as Oedipus had an engaging charm and athleticism, but his diction was not always perfect, and some of his long speeches came off as hollow and overly rhetorical. French *tirades* are not easy for American actors, even when well translated (here, by Albert Bermel). Waterman and some of his fellow actors not only needed to speak them more trippingly on the tongue, but to remember that, set speeches though they may be, they are supposed to persuade other characters, rather than just be recited in isolation.

When We Dead Awaken is, in its own way, just as difficult for American actors as *The Infernal Machine*. It tells the story of a successful sculptor, Arnold Rubek, who finds fame and money to be hollow, and his beautiful young wife to be merely tiresome. At a coastal resort in Norway, he encounters a former model named Irina, who, it soon becomes apparent, has gone mad. She posed for his most famous statue, but felt exploited, since he remained emotionally aloof while using her nude body merely for his artistic purposes. It is as if her soul passed into the statue, leaving her as cold and isolated as a block of marble. A bear hunter named Ulfhejm passing rather improbably through the resort leads Rubek, Irina, and Rubek's wife (who is sexually attracted to rough Ulfhejm) on a trip up into the mountains, where sculptor and model are killed in a storm.

Influenced by the Symbolist movement, like all of Ibsen's late plays, *When We Dead Awaken* combines realism with mysticism in a way that

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is hard for American actors to play. The trip up the mountain is less a real excursion than a journey into Rubek's soul, while both Ulfhejm and Irina seem less real people than symbols for the contrasting life styles of engagement and artistic detachment. The play recapitulates incidents from Ibsen's earlier plays (he was especially fond of symbolic trips up mountainsides), but also foreshadows twentieth-century concerns about the role of the artist and the relationship between art and life. (Ibsen was a major influence on James Joyce, who learned Norwegian just to be able to read him in the original.)

Yet despite the abstract, transcendental nature of the play, the actors handled the material admirably. Craig Smith was an outstanding Rubek, managing to seem stuffy and professorial, yet with a sense of inner fire. The difficulty in portraying a great artist, or any other extraordinary individual, is to convince the audience that you really are the genius the script says you are. Smith achieved this through his ability to be still, and intensely absorbed, on stage. He also has an ideal voice for the role, dry, slightly rasping, yet with pleasant deeper resonances that projected a feeling of great emotional depth. Angela Vitale was beautiful and mysterious as Irina, while Elise Stone was beautiful and spontaneous as Rubek's wife Maja. My only misgivings were about Joseph Menino, whose mellifluous voice and attractive manner were wrong for Ulfhejm, a raw character who is described as "ugly, ugly, ugly," but who seemed all too pleasant and middle-class.

Eve Adamson's direction took the action from a good "Masterpiece Theatre" level in the first act, with carefully drawn period detail and precise acting, to the mystical levels on the mountain, where snow, crevices, and streams were achieved through simple platforms and white drapes. Designer Sara Waterbury and Director Adamson deserve credit, if for nothing else, for showing that classical theatre can be poetic and beautiful without huge budgets. Adamson also deserves credit for using Rolf Fjelde's spare, powerful translation.

Just when I had vowed not to review any more Shakespeare for a while, after two straight *Hudson Review* pieces featuring his plays, a pair of productions slipped into New York in the fall that I could not overlook. The Ninagawa Company from Tokyo brought in a *Macbeth* that was not only resplendent in visual beauty, but was also the best overall realization of the text that I have ever seen—despite its being performed in Japanese. The Riverside Shakespeare Company, a homegrown troupe now performing way up on the East Side, did a production of *Twelfth Night* under Stuart Vaughan's direction that was beautifully spoken, charming, and, above all, clear.

Director Yukio Ninagawa set his *Macbeth* in sixteenth-century Japan, using sliding Japanese screens, a huge blood-red moon as a projected background, and beautiful Japanese costumes, including robes, kimonos, and samurai swords and armor. Ninagawa, one of Japan's leading directors, is known for the graceful way he mixes

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traditional Japanese, traditional Western, and modern avant-garde styles. Here, he drew upon traditional Noh, Kabuki, and Kyogen theatre, but in ways that were always true to Shakespeare, finding equivalents in Japanese theatrical conventions for the stylized elements in Shakespeare's text. For the drunken Porter, for example, he used an actor from the comic Kyogen theatre, where drunkenness is a stock joke. For the witches, he used ghosts from the Noh theatre, with stark white makeup and huge manes of hair; their incantations were performed as a Kabuki dance. Most strikingly of all, he turned Birnam Wood into a grove of cherry trees in full blossom. Cherry blossoms, the program reminded us, are not all beauty; in a wood of cherry trees in full bloom, according to the Japanese, people can become mad. Pink cherry petals floated down on many of the early scenes, while white ones were used in the battle, until the stage seemed covered in snow.

The result was not only the best *Macbeth* that I have ever seen, but the first one that really *worked*. The witches and apparitions, the mysterious sounds and cries, the charms and spells and woods that move, require a degree of stylization that our theatre has long since lost, but which the Japanese can still draw upon. A Western director can invent a style for Shakespeare, but his inventions can never have the same potency, in a theatre that has become stuck in the mire of Naturalism, as have the conventions of a theatre that still has some roots in a formal tradition.

Nevertheless, Western directors of Shakespeare can still move and delight us. Stuart Vaughan's *Twelfth Night* (the first production of Shakespeare that I have seen in *three years* that used Elizabethan costuming) gave us a delightful Viola in Kathryn Meisle, an equally charming Feste in John Fitzgibbon and a bluntly self-righteous Malvolio in Robert Murch. The entire cast spoke so beautifully it was as if their words were engraved in bronze; even obscure lines like Viola's "I am no fee'd post [i.e., hired messenger], madam," made sense. When I came out of the theatre at the end of the play, I overheard a young woman say to her escort, "What a wonderful story!" It is a wonderful story indeed, but it must be carefully told; every time I have taken someone to see a production of *Twelfth Night*, I have had to provide a running commentary ("Well, he's supposed to be a Duke, you see, and she's a noblewoman in disguise," etc.). This time I was alone, unfortunately, because for once my services as "translator" would have been unnecessary.

The plays of Charles Ludlam, the comic genius who ran the Ridiculous Theatrical Company for twenty years until his death from AIDS in 1987, have recently been published by Harper & Row in a splendid collected edition. While he was alive, one tended to think of the plays as vehicles for his own superb performances (not all of which were transvestite roles, by the way, though that is usually what he is

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remembered for), but in fact they continue to be performed, not only by his ongoing company, but by other troupes around the world. Witty, erudite, satirical but always charmingly humane, they are also great fun to read.

This past fall, the Ridiculous company revived one of Ludlam's biggest successes, *Camille*, with Everett Quinton, principal supporting actor to Ludlam for many years, in the title role. It was a handsomely mounted production, with Second Empire scenery by Mark Beard, costumes by Elizabeth Michal Fried that were influenced by Tenniel's *Alice in Wonderland* illustrations, and lively, well-crafted performances by every member of the large cast.

Quinton was funny and engaging as the Dumas *fils* heroine, but he is a hard-edged actor who was not really right for the role. Ludlam could be campy and vulgar when he wanted to be, but he also had a gentleness that Quinton lacks. Quinton, who also directed this production, is an inventive, intense actor, but his harsh voice and angular features meant that you were always aware that a man was playing the role; Ludlam, despite being an ordinary-looking, middle-aged fellow, whose hairy chest was fully apparent in the low-cut gowns, could actually become the character.

Ludlam was fascinated with the nineteenth century; most of his plays draw on its theatre, opera, and literature in ways that show considerable depth of knowledge. Allusions to Ibsen, Wilde, Chekhov, Wagner, Hugo, Dumas *père* and Dumas *fils*, flowed as easily from Ludlam's pen as four-letter words do from David Mamet's. For *Camille*, Ludlam went not to the well-known opera version, *La Traviata*, nor to the Garbo film, but to the 1852 play by Dumas *fils*, and, to a certain extent, to his novel on which it is based. Sentimental though it may seem, the play was considered a shocking thesis piece at the time, exposing the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie, who were unable to accept the love between a young gentleman and a courtesan. Nevertheless, the scandalous subject matter that so shocked the Parisians is sugared over with a dialogue so high-flown and euphemistic that it practically begs to be ridiculed. Ludlam did this by following the original very closely, sometimes for ten or fifteen minutes at a time, before inserting some jarring modernism ("Not the Melmac, Nanine, the Limoges!" scolds Camille when her maid puts out the wrong china for a dinner party), or an earthy expression that exposes the actual content of what is going on. *Camille*, after all, is a play about sex, and nothing much else.

The thing that made Ludlam better than most parodists, then, was a basic respect for the material being ridiculed. He knew how awful it was, but he also knew that it had a basic cleverness and charm, or it never would have been successful in the first place. Ludlam's *Camille* lets the romance of the story work on you. Some of the characters are not even parodied at all; Armand, Camille's penniless young lover, is straight Dumas *fils*. (Georg Osterman, a handsome young actor,

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played him with such sincerity in this production that he could easily have stepped into a real production of the play.) Then, when Ludlam puts in one of his zingers, which I shall *not* repeat here, you laugh not so much at the material, but at yourself for being taken in by it.

In William Nicholson's *Shadowlands*, a romantic British import, girl meets boy, girl gets boy, girl dies. It is based on the marriage of C. S. Lewis, at the age of fifty-eight, to an American admirer. The woman, Joy Davidman, comes to Oxford to meet Lewis, where they become friends. He agrees to a marriage of convenience, performed secretly and not consummated, to enable her to become a British resident. When she falls mortally ill, however, he discovers that he truly loves her. With her cancer in remission, they have three years of connubial bliss, until she finally succumbs.

Lewis, in addition to being an author of children's stories, was an apologist for Christianity. The theme of the play is that his wife's suffering and death were a test of his faith, which, unexcitingly, is shown in the end as shaken but not destroyed. One trouble with the play, however, is that Lewis' religion does not seem very Christian. His basic premise, that "this world which seems to us so real is but a shadow of the life to come," from which the play takes its title, makes him sound like a Platonist, while his rationale for suffering, that "pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world," makes him sound like Dr. Pangloss. Jesus does not loom very large in his scheme of things, let alone Christian theologians like Kierkegaard, whose writings would have demolished Lewis' escapist mysticism.

Nigel Hawthorne, an actor best known here for the "Yes Minister" television series, but with some wonderful performances on the London stage to his credit, had powerful moments as Lewis; anyone believing the old canard about British acting being polished but cold should have seen this play just for the moment when, embracing Joy's son just after her death, Hawthorne broke down and wept. Jane Alexander, one of our best actresses, was equally strong as Joy, rendering the details of the character's suffering with precision, but without becoming overly clinical. She and Hawthorne also worked well together, establishing an intimacy and affection that made their relationship seem like a genuine marriage.

The play did not do as well on Broadway as it did in London, however, where it ran for a year and a half. This was probably not because American audiences and critics are more sophisticated about tearjerker plays, but because the overall production here seemed soggy and slow. (I did not see the London version.) The supporting cast was particularly bad. Elijah Moshinsky directed both the London and the New York productions, but here he treated the secondary characters like wallpaper. For example, Paul Sparer was doddering and tame as Christopher Riley, Lewis' atheist colleague at Oxford. The character's bitchy cynicism is supposed to be a foil for Lewis'

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idealism, but Sparer provided no challenge at all, so that both characters ended up seeming bland.

Not even a sharper production, however, could have disguised the fact that *Shadowlands* is a twentieth-century *Camille*, played straight. Is this the best that England can send us these days? Charles Ludlam, thou should'st be living at this hour. Both England and America have need of thee.

Now I must confess a conflict of interest: Last summer I auditioned for the role of Christopher Riley in *Shadowlands*. Since I look like the stereotypical professor, and since (unlike most American actors) I am good at accents, I thought I had a fair shot, but lost out. What was an American actor doing, auditioning for a British import? The answer lies in the regulations of the U. S. Immigration Service, and the arcane dealings of the British and American Actors' Equity Associations. British Equity will only allow as many U. S. actors on their stage as we allow British ones on ours. Thus, Nigel Hawthorne came here in exchange for Shaun Cassidy going to London for a production of *Bus Stop*. The supporting cast for that production is British, which meant that Americans got to play the supporting roles in *Shadowlands*.

The same regulations were operating for the British musical *Miss Saigon*, set to open on Broadway about the time this review appears. Jonathan Pryce played the lead role of a Eurasian pimp on the London stage, and was scheduled to repeat the part here. On a complaint from B. D. Wong, who played the amazing transvestite role in *M. Butterfly* a few years ago, American Equity refused to let Pryce perform, on the grounds that the role should have been played by an Asian. The producer announced that he would cancel the show; Equity reconsidered its position after receiving protests from thousands of its members; the production was rescheduled for Broadway, and Pryce rehired.

I have long been a proponent of interracial casting. My feelings on this case, however, were complicated by a number of factors: First of all, the show sounded pretentious and boring, like most big, splashy British musicals. Second, I think Pryce is a lousy actor. Third, however, I don't think foreign actors should be limited from coming here in any way. (To be fair, I must note that, in the past, *British* Equity has been much stickier on this than our own, who have come to their present policy primarily in retaliation.) Fourth, as with the case of *Shadowlands*, only the lead was to be played by a foreigner, which meant in this case that some two dozen roles for Asian Americans would be lost by the cancellation.

Thus, the issue has been running around and around in my head for months. In the end, I stick to my original position. Pryce should be allowed to play the role. Equity's own regulations encourage interracial casting (the role is not Asian anyway, but *Eurasian*), and besides, it was only a legal fluke that allowed Equity to have any say in

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the matter. If the role were to be played by a white *American*, they could have done nothing about it.

In the past, Naturalistic considerations have prevented black, Hispanic, and Asian actors from playing supposedly "white" roles, even in highly stylized plays where color should not matter. Why it should seem illogical for a black actor to perform in *Cymbeline*, for example, a play loaded with illogic, was beyond me, as I said in my review. The *Miss Saigon* case was a rare example where similar arguments were being employed against a white actor. It is like the Bakke case, where slots were set aside for black students at the medical school of the University of California at Davis. Both Pryce and Bakke were victims of "reverse discrimination," yet to make that charge in a vacuum was unfair.

Cameron Mackintosh, the producer of *Miss Saigon*, then, certainly had a case. Pryce was being victimized. But where were they when there was good old-fashioned *direct* discrimination? Pryce and Mackintosh would be a lot more admirable if they had some kind of record attacking racial prejudice when it did not hurt them personally. Certainly, Mackintosh could have earned more respect if he had announced, simultaneously with the threatened withdrawal of *Miss Saigon*, a production with a person of color in a leading role traditionally played by whites. Hire James Earl Jones to play Willy Loman, or B. D. Wong to play Henry Higgins, and your credentials as a fighter of discrimination will be firmly established.

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ROBERT S. CLARK

Music Chronicle

THE RETURN OF FALL BROUGHT NEW YORK its customary musical motley, a staggering abundance stretching from the reliably unpredictable fare of the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival to the predictably reliable excellence of Carlos Kleiber's conducting of *Der Rosenkavalier* at the Metropolitan Opera. But even in this vertiginous context one event stood out as distinctly idiosyncratic: the Cleveland Orchestra, in town for a pair of concerts at Carnegie Hall, offered on one of two evenings the New York premiere of Hans Werner Henze's opera *The Bassarids.*

With a libretto (in English) by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman based on Euripides' *The Bacchae*—bassarids and bacchae are both synonymous with bacchants, followers of the god Bacchus, or Dionysus as he is called in this setting—*The Bassarids* was given its premiere at the Salzburg Festival in 1966 under the baton of Christoph von Dohnányi, and the conductor, now music director of the Cleveland Orchestra, has been throughout his career a consistent partisan of this work and Henze's music in general. In an interview published in the *New York Times* just before the performance, the composer asserted that *The Bassarids* is as much at home in the concert hall as the theater. "Auden wanted an opera seria, with arias and all that, but I wrote a symphony," Henze was quoted as saying.

In the Carnegie program notes, he elaborated on this remark. Citing Alban Berg's precedent in *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*, he said that "this form follows old rules: those of the four-movement symphony, which structure the single act of *The Bassarids.* A sonata movement is followed by a scherzo—with a series of bacchanalian dances (with a calm vocal ensemble as trio). The third movement is an adagio with fugue; the fourth, with its Ash Wednesday mood, is a passacaglia."

Be that as it may, there are a cast of characters, a chorus and a story, and at a first hearing—it will surprise no one to learn—the theatrical nature of the work makes apprehension of its symphonic procedures well nigh impossible. The action is freely adapted from Euripides. Pentheus, King of Thebes, troubled by the growing cult surrounding Dionysus, tries to deny the latter's divinity and to suppress his influence among the city's inhabitants. When he sends guards to arrest the cult's celebrants on Mount Cytheron, they include his mother Agave and her sister, as well as a young stranger who is

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Dionysus in disguise. The god mesmerizes Pentheus, and reveals his power through miraculous acts, relighting the flame on his mother Semele's tomb that Pentheus had ordered extinguished, and enabling the prisoners to escape.

Persuaded by the god to observe the Dionysian celebrations for himself, Pentheus goes to the mountain disguised as a woman. There the rituals turn to blood lust, and when Dionysus reveals that there is an intruder in their midst, Agave and the maenads—female bacchants—seize Pentheus and tear him limb from limb. In the final scene, Agave returns to Thebes, still in a trance, bearing Pentheus' head, which she thinks is that of a lion. Cadmus, her father, awakens her to reality, and as she grieves, he orders that the royal palace be burned. Dionysus takes command of Thebes, erects icons of fertility on the site of the palace, and demands the total submission of his followers to his worship.

In the generous and helpful (though poorly edited) libretto-program provided by the Clevelanders, the "argument" of the scenario is summed up thus: "the terrible revenge taken by the sensual Dionysian side of human nature if its existence is denied and its demands repressed." But the work's argument may be subtler than these words suggest. The opposition of the two forces is painted musically—Penthean order and rationality are represented by the triad and march-like rhythms, and Dionysian passion and violence by chromaticism and dance rhythms—and at the conclusion the composer tries to denote the fusion of the two in a new equilibrium by having the Dionysian music absorb elements of the Penthean.

A first exposure to this ambitious undertaking leaves one equivocating. The score, for much of its length, is of an all but stupefying emptiness. By turns harmonically static and crabbed, it seems, for all its formal underpinnings, to move in fits and starts, alternating disjunct vocal declamation and charmless arioso for the voices with modernist clichés and extravagantly noisy and percussive orchestral climaxes. Yet in the final movement means and method seem to coalesce. A kind of unity is perceptible, and the dramatic situations, propelled by that transfigured doggerel that Auden raised to a high art, exert some power. A rehearing might similarly elucidate the structure of the other movements. But I doubt it would change my view of the general quality of the musical inspiration.

You could find no more persuasive advocate for this music than Dohnányi. He seemed as comfortable with its idiom as most conductors are with Beethoven and Brahms, and wrung lyricism and impact from the most unpromising stretches. The Cleveland players did not have much opportunity to show off their fabled finesse, but still proved once again that they deserve their high reputation. The singers, led by a tonally unseductive but compelling Kenneth Riegel as Dionysus and a tonally hollow but strong Anja Silja as Agave, were more effective than the material might seem to permit.

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Among New York's musical Brahmins, *Moses und Aron*, Arnold Schoenberg's only attempt at a full-length opera, has been as long as this writer can remember the most talked about and most highly esteemed work never performed in the city. Its absence from New York stages has served intellectuals in several ways—to malign current local taste and to bolster the legend of its composer as a martyr to his elevated vision, to name just two. A few of the opera's advocates even seem to have appreciated it on its own merits. Last fall the New York City Opera gave those of us who have known the work only through recordings the chance to judge its stageworthiness. It would be hard to imagine a stronger case for it.

Moses und Aron was first conceived as an oratorio in the late twenties, when Schoenberg had become comfortable with his unique blend of twelve-tone procedures and classical forms. Its text, by the composer himself, is a dialectical examination of the relationship between the ineffable Deity and the finite and concrete ways men attain their understanding of Him. Schoenberg, born a Jew but a convert to Lutheranism in his youth, was in the midst of a spiritual reversion to the faith of his forebears in the late twenties, and many of his works of this period have their origins in the Old Testament.

For the opera's action, Schoenberg went to the Book of Exodus. The Burning Bush tells Moses that he is to be God's prophet and his brother Aaron will in turn be his "mouth"; the two proclaim to the Israelites the "new divinity" that will lead them out of their Egyptian captivity. But the people balk at serving a God that they can neither see nor comprehend, and Moses is helpless. Aaron uses his declamatory powers to quell the outburst, finally performing miracles to assuage the restlessness. Moses retreats to Mt. Sinai, and the Israelites, impatient for the practice of worship and the comfort of its cyclical reward and punishment, compel Aaron to fashion the golden calf. Blood sacrifices and an orgy follow; Moses returns, bearing the tables of the law, and rebukes Aaron for debasing the divine. Aaron replies that the people can grasp the divine only through images, and calls the tables themselves images. Moses smashes them in despair, and as the second act ends cries out, "Oh Word, thou Word that I lack!"

Here the work breaks off. Schoenberg wrote the text for a final act, in which Aaron is Moses' captive. Moses chastises his brother for turning his gifts to unworthy ends, but frees him. Aaron dies, leaving Moses to forge the Israelites' "unity with God." Several reasons have been tendered for the composer's failure to set this act to music, despite declarations over the years of his intention to do so. One of the most popular, if not the most convincing, is that Schoenberg saw himself as Moses and his serial system as the tables of the law, and felt himself, like his protagonist, unable to convey to his contemporaries the immutable logic and historical necessity that underlay his system for composition. Particularly in the later years of his life, the explanation goes, as his nontonal works failed to gain widespread accep-

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tance and he himself edged back toward tonality, he could find no way to reconnect imaginatively with Moses' ultimate triumph, or to contain the prophet's exalted vision in music.

Whatever the reason for its unfinished state, the tragic ending of this torso has the feel of rightness, whether or not the composer considered it—or by inaction unconsciously acknowledged it to be—the work's terminus. But much of what leads up to this ending is theatrically static, more a debate than a drama. The production, an imported Cologne staging first seen in 1978, brilliantly makes a virtue out of what in other hands might have been a fatal drawback. Director Hans Neugebauer, with the cooperation of his set and costume designer Achim Freyer and his lighting designer Hans Toelstede, has made high theater of the quality of stasis. Sets, props, backdrop and costumes, all close to the color of sand, were rendered monochromatic by the use of sodium and mercury vapor lamps and metal halide lamps of great intensity. The dress was contemporary: suits and ties for the men, blouses and skirts for the women, a choice that seemed oddly to divorce the action from any definable time and place.

Adding to the sense of detachment, the entire production takes place behind a scrim, which is punctured at critical moments—as when Aaron turns the Nile's water to blood—by bright shafts of light that seem to stop time in its tracks. And even the few opportunities for rousing stage commotion, such as the bacchanal around the golden calf and the sacrifice of naked virgins at its climax, were realized in a stylized, almost matter-of-fact way. This was neither life nor history, but the stuff of myth, animated by the engine of thought.

Richard Cross was Moses, whose role is, except for one or two isolated instances, entirely written in *Sprechstimme*, that pitched speech that Schoenberg invented for *Pierrot lunaire*. He was superb, rendering the German text intelligibly, forcefully and with great sensitivity. Tenor Thomas Young sang the disjunct lines skillfully and evoked sympathy as Aaron—a crucial factor in the work's dialectical tension—even if he was a shade less glib than the contrast with Moses calls for.

The chorus showed great aplomb in the massed passages of the crowd scenes, with their craggy counterpoint. Christopher Keene's conducting got commendable playing from the orchestra, of whom a lot is required by Schoenberg's complex writing. Important lines and motifs emerged clearly, and textures were generally solid and clean, though there was not much sense of lift and lilt to relieve the general impression of dutifulness. Still, revivals should give everyone a chance to get this demanding exercise in their fingers and throats. It will be a great pleasure to encounter it in the theater in coming seasons.

I returned last fall to the Metropolitan Opera's production of *Don Giovanni* that was new in the spring of 1990, and I am happy to report that in every respect it was improved. Some of the sillier excesses of Franco Zeffirelli's production were gone: Giovanni is dragged to

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damnation by the Commendatore alone now, unaided by the band of cartoon demons that scrabbled along originally. The young American baritone Thomas Hampson was a Giovanni whose dash and animal magnetism reminded one of Cesare Siepi and George London. His tone, lighter and brighter than the bass usually heard in the role, illuminated the recitatives especially well, and everywhere he sang with fluency and polish. His Giovanni is driven and sometimes desperate for all of his surface confidence and abandon.

Cheryl Studer conveyed a sense of vulnerability as Donna Anna, and her bright soprano soared in the difficult arias. Roberta Alexander enlivened Elvira with voice and gesture: by turns importunate, shrewish and hysterical, she recalled the fact that on an eighteenth-century stage this abandoned damsel would have been thought comical. Her firm tone at both ends of her register sculpted the musical lines with energy; she had the wit too to vary the *da capo* repeats of her arias. These strong presences and the remainder of the good cast delivered a sense that the characters of the drama were interacting. James Levine conducted the orchestra in what seemed a more refined manner than he displayed last spring, but that impression may have come as much from the stage as from the pit.

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JOHN LOUGHERY

Glasnost Hopes, MoMA Failures

"BETWEEN SPRING AND SUMMER: Soviet Conceptual Art in the Era of Late Communism" at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art was the kind of exhibition that all reasonable people would want to like. Artists who've been oppressed by the aesthetic Know-Nothings of a totalitarian government somehow manage to keep alive the critical spirit of modern art, give their ideas elaborate visual form, and produce a large body of "underground" work that is eventually freed to make its way abroad: that has to be cause for celebration. Yet (I admit) I went to Boston with some pretty low-level expectations—influenced, no doubt, by too many Conceptual Art shows in New York in recent years that have either dealt with the same overworked "ideas" or failed to give those ideas an original or visually compelling form. The words "Conceptual Art" just don't suggest great daring anymore.

I shouldn't have worried. "Between Spring and Summer" was one of the more absorbing exhibitions of Conceptual Art that I've ever seen, infinitely fresher than the Whitney's recent "Mind Over Matter: Concept and Object" show that included the usual Annette Lemieuxs and Ashley Bickertons. Perhaps the fact that all of the artists in the ICA show had at one time or another been denied permission to exhibit publicly (hence the term "Aptart" to describe some of their work, as it was shown only in their apartments), and the fact that their access to good canvas, paint, or sculptural materials was always highly limited, add to the sense of authenticity the exhibition imparts. For artists like Ilya Kabakov, Andrei Filippov, Ludmila Skripkina, and Oleg Petrenko, the concepts they are pondering emerge from a real struggle, a dire way of life, and their anti-aesthetic forms and mundane materials seem the best possible evocation of their content.

Entering the foyer of the Institute of Contemporary Art, we left Boston behind us rather abruptly in the face of Alexander Brodsky and Ilya Utkin's massive tower, a brooding installation designed specifically for this space that served as an excellent means of passage into a Soviet world of frustration, grime, and ennui. The entire staircase of the building was enveloped in a dark metal scaffolding with several layers of black wire mesh placed around and across it, creating an edifice that allowed access to the stairs but immersed the traveler in a cleverly designed pillar—or, from some angles, a pit—of monochromatic debris. One flight down, we saw at the foot of the

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structure the sad remains of its marble base, a remnant of an architectural heritage willfully destroyed. A look upwards through the tiers of wire confronted us with a monument to shoddy workmanship, bad social planning, urban and ecological ruin, even spiritual exhaustion. Bottles, sneakers, broken lamps and lampshades, tin cans, tires, books, radios, jars, bicycle wheels, tennis rackets, a hundred objects (all painted the same sooty black) were scattered about, right over our heads or at our feet or at a distance, two and three tiers of wire above. Remembering the Utopian grandeur of Vladimir Tatlin's spiraling metal *Monument to the Third International*—and the association necessarily leapt to mind upon entering the ICA foyer—we were being invited to walk by, through, and under the Brodsky-Utkin tower to contemplate a metaphor for the brave new world Tatlin and the Constructivists thought they were celebrating. But the decay is many-layered now. The god that failed wasn't only Communism or Marxist economics; the whole idea of the revolutionary power of art has been run to ground forever.

Interestingly, a few of the works in this exhibition could be said to pertain as much to American problems as they do to Soviet ones. Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, the notorious expatriate collaborators who've recently left New York for the rust-belt of New Jersey, are represented by some of their *Bayonne Rock Garden* pieces, clay pots filled with soil that sprouts both plants and abandoned machine parts. Likewise, Timur Novikov's red flag, *Earth, Air, Space, Water*, that depicts the modern-day version of the four elements and their symbols (in this case, a tank, a plane, a missile, and a ship) could just as easily apply to the Western transformation of the natural order. More distinctly Soviet, though, are constructions like Yuri Avvakumov and Sergei Podyomschikov's *Space Bridge* and Ludmila Skripkina and Oleg Petrenko's work as the team known by the appellation "Peppers." *Space Bridge* is an architectural work under glass, a model of just what its title implies, composed entirely of playing cards, addressing both the lack of innovative architectural programs in the USSR and the fragility of the badly made structures that do exist. The "Peppers" duo is equally whimsical: *Bone Marrow*, for instance, pokes fun at the staple of the Russian diet by exposing what looks to be the inside of an enlarged human bone stuffed with whole green peas.

Ilya Kabakov, at fifty-seven by far the oldest artist in the show and an inspirational figure for some in the generation that followed, was represented by the most elaborate work of all. *Sixteen Strings* is a room-size mixed-media installation with its own relentless audio effects. Viewers entering Kabakov's shadowy space are encouraged to borrow a small flashlight near the entrance. Inside, after adjusting to the dark, we see sixteen strings stretched tautly from one wall to the other at shoulder height, rather like laundry lines, from which hang hundreds of—of what? Odds and ends: crumpled cigarette packets,

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bottle tops, bits of cloth or fragments of newspaper. In short, a mass of apartment-house garbage left out to dry. We stare at all this amid the din of squabbling voices and angry questions (translations of the non-stop taped conversations can be read, by flashlight, on the wall), suggestive of the horror of communal living—shared kitchens and toilets, thin walls, a degrading lack of color, space, cleanliness, and light—that Kabakov has taken as his theme more than once before. The psychological toll that would be exacted from a daily exposure to such claustrophobia, dinginess, accumulation of junk, and lack of privacy is better conveyed in *Sixteen Strings* than in any documentary photographs with which I am familiar.

A much starker image was Andrei Filippov's *The Last Supper*, a reflection on the Communist goal of displacing Christian faith with the new religion of the state. A long empty table covered in a dark red tablecloth with black fringe is set with thirteen white plates in a tidy row. On each side of each plate, a jet-black hammer and a jet-black sickle complete the arrangement. The moving tableau of Christ and his disciples has been simply and pathetically replaced with a formal, arid, and heartless construction, a spiritual emblem no one could believe in.

The catalogue for "Between Spring and Summer" is every bit as interesting as the exhibition itself and very different from most publications of a similar nature.[1] A well-designed book, it spares the reader any traditional museum-style prose (or, for the most part, its opposite: the jargon-rich verbiage perfected by independent curators like Tricia Collins & Richard Millazo), bland observations on artistic influences and post-structuralist sources, or the usual dry summaries of what we're looking at. Instead, David Ross chronicles in fascinating detail the evolution of the show in the context of the ongoing upheavals in Soviet society, Margarita Tupitsyn explains the complicated social background that gave rise to the "unofficial" art of the 1980s, and Ilya Kabakov himself shares a sobering meditation "On Emptiness." Several other writers provide brief, insightful commentaries on subjects like Komar and Melamid's experience of America, the Soviet understanding of Conceptualism, and the decay of some of Moscow's most impressive older buildings. With the show and this catalogue, Americans interested in contemporary art and politics are given a glimpse of an underground life, a tough-minded, clear-thinking rebellion of the spirit, that we knew little about before the age of Gorbachev.

For a long time now, and especially since its grand reopening in 1983, the Museum of Modern Art has been assuring its critics that it had every intention of giving more curatorial thought and space on its

[1] David A. Ross (ed.), BETWEEN SPRING AND SUMMER: Soviet Conceptual Art in the Era of Late Communism, exhibition catalogue. MIT Press. $21.00.

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calendar to the current art scene. Optimists have taken MoMA at its word and hoped for the best; realists have been—let's say, skeptical. But if anyone needed further evidence that under Kirk Varnedoe, William Rubin's successor as director of painting and sculpture, "modern" would continue to mean "modernist," not "contemporary," the exhibition "High and Low" would do the trick. Long gone are the pioneering days of the adventurous Alfred Barr, Jr. There is, it seems, too much money and prestige at stake for MoMA to be anything other than a magnificent historical showcase. That isn't a terrible thing to be, of course. The culture needs one. It's just that we had been led, particularly with Varnedoe's ascendency, to expect all that and much more.

"High and Low," Varnedoe's debut exhibition as director (co-curated with *New Yorker* art critic Adam Gopnik), promised to explore a fascinating and timely subject, the relationship throughout the twentieth century between "high art" and "popular culture." Everyone knows about the revitalizing influence of Parisian street life, kiosk posters, newspapers and advertisements on the still lifes of Picasso, Braque, Gris, and later Stuart Davis. We know about the fragments of everyday life that Miro, Schwitters, Cornell, and assorted Surrealists used in their paintings, collages, and constructions. What we want to know about is the trickier matter of what this influence, continuing at a breakneck speed into our own time, has meant to the fine arts in the later years of the century, as animation, television, rock videos, cinematic special effects, and graffiti have changed the visual landscape of America. From Juan Gris to Peter Saul and Julie Wachtel, from Fernand Leger to Kenny Sharf and Jean-Michel Basquiat: this aesthetic development is what we need to have sorted out. Has the impact of pop culture continued to be the refreshing and welcome inspiration for serious artists that it was in 1910 or 1930? How should we view Pop Art now that we have almost thirty years' perspective on it? Was there a point at which the pop-culture influence ceased to be salutary and became oppressive? Unfortunately—and annoyingly—these are just the questions the Varnedoe-Gopnik exhibition doesn't choose to answer.

The thesis of this show is that "again and again . . . popular culture has served modern artists as a point of recovery for certain aspects of the high-art tradition."[2] From Daumier and Picasso through Claes Oldenburg and Cindy Sherman, so-called lowbrow subjects, genres, formats, and materials have invigorated the fine arts at just those moments when they were most in danger of depletion and academicization. This is surely a plausible point to make, especially when accounting for the most serious creative expression in the first four or five decades of the century. And the pageant that Varnedoe and

[2] Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, HIGH AND LOW: Modern Art and Popular Culture, exhibition catalogue, p. 362. Museum of Modern Art. $30.00.

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Gopnik unfold is splendid, energetic, and convincing, if a bit predictable. A room of superb Cubist still lifes, like Gris's *The Man at the Cafe* or *Breakfast*, is followed by a room of collages by Hausmann, Schwitters, Ballo, and Ernst, one more captivating than the other. We note their appropriation of the commonplace—and their touch of genius. And on and on it goes (MoMA has always loved these strict time-line shows): Leger and Miro, the dependable Gerald Murphy, Duchamp's irreverent Readymades, the old fur-lined tea cup, Jasper Johns's beer cans and Robert Rauschenberg's Coke bottles. But after directing us through the Pop Art rooms with their colorful, banal array of Rosenquists and Warhols, then past Ed Ruscha's gas station and Philip Guston's bug-eyed heads, something strange happens. The exhibition is in a rush, an indelicate haste, to end before the section many visitors would have been looking forward to with the greatest curiosity. Like dinner guests hustled from the table just as the conversation takes a contentious and interesting turn, we're amazed to find ourselves heading home deprived of the real feast, or debate, we were promised. For Varnedoe and Gopnik conclude their narrative with only three examples of the post-1960s merger of high and low. Elizabeth Murray's cartoon-style explosions on canvas, Jeff Koons's stainless-steel souvenirs from the Garden of Commodities that America has become, and Jenny Holzer's electronic sanctum (all aura and no meaning) bring the show to an abrupt close.

How is this to be accounted for? Five Cy Twomblys and no Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, or any subway graffiti writers? A barrage of now-venerable Pop Art (a blue-chip investment if ever there was one) and no Julie Wachtel, Peter Saul, Kenny Sharf, Meyer Vaisman, or David Salle? No funky Chicago Imagists? No Barbara Kruger or William Wiley? Are we supposed to infer that the truly valid overlap of art and pop culture, that happy infusion of adrenaline, was winding down by the 1980s? Not likely. In any case, a visual experience of the exhibition's theme is denied or withheld, a decision that can't be justified.

"High and Low" is a triumph of archival research in that everything anyone could possibly want to know about the exact comics that inspired Roy Lichtenstein or the urinal ads "R. Mutt" might have perused is spelled out for us. Perhaps more importantly, Gopnik's essay "Contemporary Reflections" in the catalogue is as sharp an account of eighties art as one is likely to find—and, in fact, it confronts some of the very issues (and illustrates the recent works) which the exhibition itself avoids. But this seems to me not at all fair. When it comes to the hard questions of quality and worth, which the exhibition itself should address *on its walls and in its choices*, the curatorial point of view has been too well-hidden. The sanctity of the temple of Modernism has been preserved, but is that what MoMA should be all about?

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On a more positive note, the last several months offered a number of sound historical shows that examined lesser-known names in twentieth-century art and some gallery exhibitions of more than usual interest.

The most exciting and overdue retrospective was the Morgan Russell show that historian Marilyn Kushner organized for a three-museum tour in 1990. As an expatriate in France before the Great War, Russell was one of the first Americans to think long and hard about non-representational art and to conceive of a painting as an arrangement and reverberation of color planes rather than a depiction of an event or the record of an external scene. Yet his name almost never appears in the standard textbooks as the prophet that he was: his is the classic case of an artist whose bad luck and lack of commercial and critical success denied him the chance for growth and recognition he should have had. The Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo owns Russell's monumental *Synchromy in Orange: To Form* (1914), a landmark of "Synchromist" color abstraction, and was an appropriate site for the final venue of Kushner's bountiful, splendidly organized exhibition. To study Russell's abstractions and his later representational pictures (he ultimately decided that his color-abstractions were an aesthetic dead end) is to feel the presence of an individual—eccentric and unfulfilled though he may have been—who understood the lure of pigment on canvas, had a confident feel for its properties, and cared more about following his own quixotic bent than creating neat, saleable products. Rare attributes in any age.

The radically different directions abstract painting moved in, post-Russell, were nicely illustrated by the Burgoyne Diller retrospective at the Whitney last fall, a Jules Olitski survey at the Salander-O'Reilly Gallery, and a Philip Guston Show at the McKee Gallery. Diller has long existed in the shadow of Piet Mondrian, and it was high time for a full-scale review of his career. Yet I can't say that I left the exhibition, ably curated by Barbara Haskell, any wiser than when I entered—that is, if I was hoping to learn why I should honor Diller's geometric abstractions as something more than a less vital version of his master's. Certainly it is easy to respect this artist's commitment to the doctrine of Neo-Plasticism (a reverence for right angles and bars of primary colors, a love of visual severity and disdain for anything subjective or emotional); the angst of any form of Expressionism can wear thin pretty fast. Yet the paintings of Burgoyne Diller, seen in quantity, looked more mechanical to me, less imbued with the élan that a great Mondrian displays, than I had expected.

Jules Olitski hails from a different aesthetic universe than the one Burgoyne Diller occupies, and his show of paintings from the last three decades, while not his best in recent memory, was interesting for the drama of the contrast. The graceful color-field painter of twenty years ago is now dealing in huge gelled gobs of paint, dredged across the canvas with a thick brush. If the rigors of geometry meant

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everything to Diller, the unrestrained materiality of paint is what still excites Olitski. Midway between these two poles is the towering figure of Philip Guston, as intellectual as Diller and as sensually striking as Olitski tries to be. The McKee Gallery show concentrated on a dozen of Guston's works from the early 1960s that preceded his rediscovery of figurative imagery. In these large, difficult, and anxious paintings, vast webs of gray (with an undercoating of pink and blue) wrestle with smaller masses of black paint while an open, unpainted area around the forms tentatively contains the action. We don't know—can't know—if something is being erased or if something is being created in this churning field of action, but (given the dates of the canvases, 1961-1965), the whole enterprise feels like a rebuke to the Pop Artists and an urgent personal exploration whose end is not yet in sight. Volatile and troubled, these twelve paintings also felt like an act of faith by a contemporary of Pollock, Rothko, and Kline, whose heroic day had already passed.

Coming in the Summer 1991 issue of The Hudson Review: "Myths and Mishegaas: Robert Graves and Laura Riding," by Harold Fromm, "Iris," a long poem by Mark Jarman, Gilberto Perez on Antonioni's *Eclipse*, William H. Pritchard on Ackroyd's Dickens, poems by Louis Simpson, etc.

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TOM WILHELMUS

Visionary Historians

> History, *mother* of truth; the idea is astounding. Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an investigation of reality, but as its origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what took place; it is what we think took place. The final clauses—*example and lesson to the present, and warning to the future*—are shamelessly pragmatic.
>
> —Jorge Luis Borges, from "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote"

CURRENT THEORY EXPLAINS THAT WRITTEN HISTORY reinvents the past to meet the needs of the present. "Truth," according to Nietzsche, is the product of a "mobile army of metaphors": and there is no truth except the one portrayed in the array of voices and vocabularies which translates event into consciousness. Since they are human voices, they inevitably have needs that are "shamelessly pragmatic," though such pragmatism does not have to be conceived as utilitarian in any narrow-minded way. I would say, for instance, that high on the list of pragmatic goals for writers or readers of historical fiction is the desire to soften the impact of current events, to forestall contingency and create an opportunity for reflection, to delay action, and to limit the effect of cruel immediacy. For what purpose? To create a self, to escape unpleasant or threatening circumstances, to avoid past errors, to provide an "example and lesson to the present, and warning to the future."

The finest fictions this season are historical. Foremost among these is Peter Matthiessen's *Killing Mister Watson*,[1] about the Ten Thousand Islands region of southwest Florida roughly a century ago. It is also about a shadowy historical figure, E. J. Watson, who for more than twenty years dominated the lives of people along that coast by the force of his sinister personality.

On October 24, 1910 at Chokoloskee after a series of murders at his nearby Chatham River plantation and in the wake of the most damaging hurricane on record, a group of frightened local inhabitants killed E. J. Watson by filling his body so full of lead that he looked like a hog. That is to say that, like Joseph Conrad in *Lord Jim*, Matthiessen begins by stating the most outward and visible facts

[1] KILLING MR. WATSON, by *Peter Matthiessen*. Random House. $21.95.

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before going on to explore their causes and consequences. And he ends, again like Conrad, by showing how Watson's death is the product of a clash between Watson's inscrutable will and the local community's fear and doubt.

To explain these events, Matthiessen creates a chorus of voices who are ostensibly the descendants of the "Pioneer Families of Southwest Florida" to whom the book is dedicated. Their voices, interspersed with actual newspaper accounts, provide an oral history which makes the novel sound realistic. Most importantly, however, they also provide a collective commentary on the action much like the chorus in a Greek tragedy. And Watson is their subject. Seduced by Watson and afraid of him, they treat him like the hero in a tragedy. They are his creation, and he theirs. Such that the longer Watson lives on his Chatham River plantation and attempts to grab all the land he can get and take control of the local commerce in skins, egrets, vegetables, and syrup, and the more he bullies and cheats them, the more they are willing to elaborate his reputation—beginning with the rumor that earlier in Oklahoma he had killed the outlaw queen, Belle Star.

Like other heroes of the American landscape, Watson combines frontier lawlessness with a desire to settle down and be happily domesticated—the subject of works from Cooper to Twain, from Hemingway and Fitzgerald to Raymond Chandler. To his credit, Matthiessen does not preach about all the things that are wrong with such a figure—though he has done so elsewhere—a spirit which uses ruthless exploitation as a means to achieve social respectability. Matthiessen does *not* preach about the rape of the environment, the destruction of the Indians, brutalization of women and families, the depletion in resources, damage to human lives caused by this unbridled entrepreneurial spirit. He even implies that the killers of Mr. Watson were pretty awful to do so—however much, if it is to cure itself, the community must learn to sacrifice this kind of hero.

If *Killing Mr. Watson* explores a peculiarly American historical guilt, Hugo Claus's *The Sorrow of Belgium*[2] tells a European story of similar significance. Set in the years between 1939 and 1946, Claus describes the ills of his native Flanders in a manner that cannot have endeared him to his native Flemings. Instead he has created a destructive memoir of a people's ambivalence in the face of the politics of the 1930s and 40s in generous, and ungenerous, detail (the work is 608 pages long). The work centers on the life of Louis Seynaeve, a young Fleming and emerging writer, from the time he is ten to about seventeen, starting with his life in a convent school and ending with the creation and submission of his first story, "The Sorrow," which surprisingly turns out to be the first 230 pages of the present volume.

[2] THE SORROW OF BELGIUM, by *Hugo Claus*. Trans. by *Arnold J. Pomerans*. Pantheon Books. $24.95.

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Speaking with the publisher, Louis reflects on what he has written: "It was a joke," he thought, "It was not a joke."

Like most adolescents, Seynaeve is a mixture of scatological and erotic impulses, slovenly behavior, an heroic self-image, and intolerable moral certitude. Our first glimpse of him is at the convent school where the boys, with Seynaeve's leadership, create their own private sodality, the Apostles, whose rituals require the smuggling of indexed books and the chivalric "rescue" of a demented sister whom the boys believe is being held against her will. The war ends all such innocent preoccupations.

Belgium has been victimized by being turned into a battleground by contending powers on each of its borders, but the country—at least in its bourgeois values—is ill-suited to its martyrdom. Mirrored within Seynaeve's family and fellow villagers are all the prejudice, blind stupidity, and moral cupidity that had contributed to the war itself. Seynaeve's father, a printer, is obsessed with the conflict between the Flemings and French-speaking Walloons and welcomes the Nazis as potential saviors. Seynaeve's mother falls in love with a German officer for whom she works and shows more concern over the health of her lover's dog than her family or the war's other victims. The local countess becomes a madam in Brussels. The church tolerates the occupation without complaining. Movies provide a glittery distraction. One disreputable aunt has married a Jew, and the rest of the family shun her. Sausages and sex are of more consequence to these people than casualties. The revered poet of the Flemings switches allegiances, and styles. Local politics seem more important than the war.

Seynaeve, too, joins a fascist youth group and experiences how to be a spy, lout, and bully. For a while he even goes on retreat in service to the Fatherland. His sexual adventures include a continuing flirtation with a half-literate village gypsy, a substitute for his real interest in a refined and beautiful fellow member of the Hitler Youth. He is slovenly and greedy, sneering and callow, moralizing but seldom moral. And in this sense Claus never implies that Seynaeve's gifts—for fantasy and for words—are redemptive. Only his instinct for seeing life ironically and never at face value, that is to say only his intelligence and his restless respect for the complexity found in life, and in books, argue his salvation.

In its sweep and scope as well as in its portrait of the evolving consciousness of the writer, *The Sorrow of Belgium* bears comparison with works like *Buddenbrooks*, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (and *Ulysses*), and *The Tin Drum*. As thoughtful and complete as Mann, as critical of his own roots as Joyce, and as humorous and anti-war as Grass, *The Sorrow of Belgium* revives a tradition of the novel that is more socially and politically detailed, brooding (and humorous) and intelligent than most current fiction and more committed to an

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unvarnished view of historical truth about a neglected corner of World War II.

More familiar to most readers, the long and bitter struggle between Tolstoy and his wife, Sofya Andreyevna, over disposition of his copyrights and estate has proved a perpetually interesting subject for literary investigation. No doubt part of the fascination lies in how the struggle appears to belie Tolstoy's greatness and the spiritual doctrine he preached during the last years of his life. In Jay Parini's new novel, *The Last Station: A Story of Tolstoy's Last Year,*[3] this struggle is portrayed especially as a conflict between Sofya Andreyevna and Tolstoy's principal disciple, Vladimir Chertov, against the backdrop of a whirling stream of believers, journalists, photographers, and curiosity seekers who visited Tolstoy's estate during the last year of his life. In the hands of another writer, all the grief, deceit, intrigue, faked suicide attempts, divided loyalties, and final disintegration that drove the old man to his last escape from Yasnaya Polyana might have contributed an atmosphere of sordid farce—especially the last scene at the tiny railroad station at Astapovo where the novelist, too ill to continue, eventually succumbed, while Sofya Andreyevna, denied access to Tolstoy's deathbed by Chertov, waited just yards away and over a hundred newspapermen looked on. Yet despite these events, Parini's approach managed to be studied, lyrical, and restrained.

He achieves this effect partly by having his six principal characters represent themselves through their own diaries, interspersed with quotations from Tolstoy himself and several poems by the author. As a result, he keeps the focus on individual personalities—an approach he no doubt derived from the germ that inspired the novel, his stumbling on the diary of Tolstoy's secretary, Valentin Bulgakov, in a Naples bookstore. This event led to his reading other memoirs and diaries as well. The result, he says, was "like looking at a constant image through a kaleidoscope. I soon fell in love with the continually changing symmetrical forms of life that came into view."

The symmetry, however, lies not in the events but rather in Parini's carefully chosen language and his elegant, restrained style. The fact that all of the diary writers speak in their own voices gives sympathy to their causes. Sofya Andreyevna's acquisitiveness seems less culpable in the context of the emotional abandonment she had previously suffered. The daughter Sasha's mannerisms seem understandable given the titans she lives among. Even the severe Chertov seems forgivable once we learn about his love of Leo Nikoleyovich and the cause they share.

Bulgakov, however, is the reader's observational center. Like us, he is a newcomer, and his youth and idealism mirror our own innocence of what is going on. Bulgakov was hired by Chertov not only to assist

[3] THE LAST STATION: A Novel of Tolstoy's Last Year, by *Jay Parini*. Henry Holt. $22.95.

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the great man but also to act as a spy. Yet he never loses his objectivity. He is charmed by Tolstoy's personal warmth, inspired calm, and continuing productivity, but he also sympathizes with Sofya Andreyevna's desperate desire to regain the man she had married and secure her own and her children's futures. And although he listens while Tolstoy preaches chastity, he still manages to fall in love with a co-disciple and learns to weigh the claims of idealism against the claims of the flesh. In this manner this elegantly written history takes us out of the media event that Tolstoy's final days had become and humanizes our understanding in ways no official history can.

More troubling is the vision of the difficulty human beings may have negotiating the barriers that divide them provided in *Foreign Studies*[4] by the Japanese Christian novelist, Shusaku Endo. Originally published in Japan in 1965, and just recently translated, it arrives at the depressing conclusion that individuals from different cultures can never reach a satisfactory level of understanding, because of the complex differences of their separate social institutions entrenched within their histories. In France himself in the 1950s, Endo had learned that scaling the hill of the French language led him only to realize "that towering beyond the hill . . . lay [another] enormous mountain. Further on lay an even more imposing mountain. I now found myself wondering whether there was any way that a visitor from the Far East could ever truly comprehend."

A dramatization of this awareness, *Foreign Studies* is a fascinating exploration of the alienation Easterners may feel when confronting the West, a book I would recommend to anyone interested in East-West relations, in the relevance of "multicultural studies," or even in how to survive your junior year abroad.

Endo calls his work a novel even though it falls into three very unequal parts. The first, entitled "A Summer in Rouen," is 25 pages long and tells the story of a young Japanese Roman Catholic, named Kudo, who goes to stay with a French family in Rouen just after the war only to wind up desperately lonely and alienated. Partly this is because the provincial family who host him make him suffer a number of indignities including regarding him as a surrogate for their own son who had died in the war. Unable to defend himself from assaults of Catholic guilt and under an iron necessity to exhibit only the most refined Japanese courtesy, Kudo becomes increasingly morose. This story sets the stage for the second, "Araki Thomas," only 12 pages long, which tells of the apostate Japanese Catholic, trained in Rome in the seventeenth century who, rather than face martyrdom on his return to Japan, recants his Catholicism.

Both of these opening stories address only the outward problems that Easterners may encounter when they come in touch with the

[4] FOREIGN STUDIES, by *Shusaku Endo*. Trans. by *Mark Williams*. Linden Press/Simon & Schuster. $18.95.

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West, but they are necessary preparation for the third, "And You, Too," roughly 180 pages long, which addresses the psychological.

In this tale, a professor of French literature named Tanaka has come to Paris in order to further his career and to research a monograph he is writing on the Marquis de Sade. Tortured by depression and gloom in the cold northern-European city, he vacillates between identifying with those fellow countrymen who find no particular difficulty accommodating themselves to Western daily life and those, like his hotel-mate Sakisaka, who suffer depression, guilt, and illness when they cannot come to terms with a culture that is fundamentally alien to them. An example of failure to his more "professional" colleagues, Sakisaka, an architect, says he does not regret the tuberculosis that is forcing him to return home. To him the traditions of art in France and Japan are so different that he will never reconcile them; therefore, he prefers to leave no matter what the cost to his personal dignity and social esteem.

Tanaka's own study of Sade—similarly undertaken for reasons of academic advancement—leads to a similar outcome. Sade, who combines surface rationalism with unconscious bestiality, represents what is most alien in Western culture for the East (Endo says Sartre and de Beauvoir initiated the postwar study of Sade in order to analyze the consequences apparent in the war itself). Tanaka's bafflement with Sade contributes to his eventual revulsion from his sojourn in the West and to his own subsequent illness. As a penetrating study of the psychological effects of deracination, stimulated at least in part by something we have difficulty looking at in ourselves, *Foreign Studies* holds out the possibility of knowledge for Westerners as well.

Two novels, *Wildlife* by Richard Ford[5] and *The Tongues of Angels* by Reynolds Price,[6] are both portraits of individual history in relation to particular phases of the American past. Of the two, Ford's is the better crafted. Subtlely nuanced and deeply emblematic, it tells the story of sixteen-year-old Joe Brinson at an unsteady moment in his family's life in Great Falls, Montana, in 1960, when his father loses his job as a golf instructor and his mother must find work and eventually has an affair with a wealthy, local businessman. What is especially compelling about this novel is the air of submerged tension beneath a surface of almost catatonic calm at a moment in Jim's and America's life when everything should have been optimistic and stable and yet flirts with imminent disaster. Jim's father fails at the dream job of the beautiful athlete. His mother grasps quickly after success in the form of a widowed cripple ("I have to be smart about things," she says, "I have to think about who pays the bills"). Jim, who is innocent but determined to be cool, cannot lash out at either of his parents and must learn about life. At one point, waiting in the car for his mother to

[5] WILDLIFE, by *Richard Ford*. Atlantic Monthly Press. $18.95.
[6] THE TONGUES OF ANGELS, by *Reynolds Price*. Atheneum. $17.95.

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leave Miller's house, he ponders if there was "some pattern or an order to things . . . not one you knew but that worked on you and made events when they happened seem correct, or made you [at least] willing to accept them even if they seemed like wrong things."

I am impressed with the manner in which Ford does not overstate the emotional consequences of the family's disaster (the mother even returns after a couple of years away from the father and son) but lets them speak for themselves. The result, as in "Musée des Beaux Arts," is "something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky" or in this case into adult life.

Less successful as a portrait of youthful learning, *The Tongues of Angels* makes more sweeping claims about the meaning of experience but is eventually less instructive. On the first page, the narrator Bridge Boatner announces that years before when he was twenty-one he may have caused a death. Later this turns out to be the death of a fourteen-year-old boy who had a stroke, perhaps the result of a snakebite and too much exertion when Boatner was his counselor one summer in the mountains of North Carolina. Yet of the many religious and semi-religious, mystical and semi-mystical, aesthetic and semi-aesthetic overtones Price tries to draw from this situation, few succeed in casting more than a glimmer of illumination. Boatner is a painter and occupies his time in painting a landscape of the setting, but only manages to talk about the timelessness a successful painting should inspire. He does not manage to convey it (doubtless a difficult thing to do in a novel). The young man who dies, Rafe Noren, is a dancer of traditional Indian dances over which Boatner swoons because of their aesthetic purity. But the explanation is similarly unconvincing. To the degree that any part of *The Tongues of Angels* depends upon presenting a believable explanation of an epiphany, much less the epiphany itself, it is unconvincing.

What is convincing about the novel are those moments which nostalgically capture the innocence of a youth like Bridge Boatner's in the 1950s, at a time when camping and Indian lore and ignorance about sex and an unexamined love of the novels of Thomas Wolfe were still possible. Price does a credible job of suggesting what life was like pre-TV.

Finally, in a dazzling display of the past reinvented in a mobilized metaphor the likes of which we will not see again, Donald Barthelme, who died in 1989, has presented us with a retelling of the King Arthur legend in his novel *The King*.[7]

The principal device of this rendering is to transport Arthur, his entourage, and a few inventive additional characters (including a Black Knight who really is black and a Brown Knight from Scotland where brown is the color of all things excellent, including whiskey,

[7] THE KING, by *Donald Barthelme*. Edward Burlingame/Harper & Row. $16.95.

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heath and sexual prowess) into the present century and give them a shot at commenting on World War II.

As with all of Barthelme's work, absurdist comedy has its serious point. To those who would argue that events and not metaphors create history, this novel replies that in a world where "Today, bombing is meant to be a learning experience" and one questions whether "*hacking* at things . . . is the best way to exist" the greatest virtue of leadership may be in deciding what *not* to do (Arthur calls this "negative capability") which includes in this case *not* pursuing the Bomb as if it were a holy grail. Instead it may be time (though Arthur himself "is eternal") to focus the question of leadership on how to live "In the same universe of discourse," says Arthur, with the people themselves. In this way, militarism may itself be defeated: "'We have plans for you, the warrior class,' said Walter the Penniless. 'Your functions, in the future, will be chiefly ornamental. Ushers, traffic wardens, overseers of car parks, doormen, elevator operators, that sort of thing. Little niches where you can do no harm.'" Not a bad way to reinvent history, when you think of it.

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ROBERT PHILLIPS

Fiction Chronicle

THERE IS AN OLD ARABIAN PROVERB which states, "A novel is a garden carried in the pocket." In reading through the cartons of fiction submitted for this chronicle, I have kept that proverb in mind. With one exception, unless a book took seed and flourished in the imagination, I have chosen not to review it. There are too many good books published which fail to receive adequate praise or to be reviewed at all. The exception has been made because it is a work by a greatly admired American writer, even a cult figure, whose garden—or so it seems to me—has become an overworked and arid little patch. Another novel is reviewed not so much because it is totally successful, but because the hugely talented author is quickly emerging as a leading voice of his generation.

In the past, when friends romped through all the novels of Barbara Pym, they asked me what English novelist they should read next. I replied, "Molly Keane." But dear Mrs. Keane—for whom "a trapped rat is safer than a prisoned lover"—has only produced three or four novels under her own name. When my friends have exhausted those, I am now ready with a third recommendation: A. N. Wilson. Wilson is as funny as Pym, as wicked as Keane, and more intellectual than either.

A Bottle in Smoke[1] is the second of a projected trilogy continuing the story of one Julian Ramsay, whose eccentric childhood was chronicled in the first, *Incline Our Hearts*. The last chapter of that novel has Julian repeating the Ten Commandments. When it comes to "Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery," he repeats the words in the prayer book, but "with absolutely no confidence that my heart, in the years to come, would be inclined to keep this law."

The new novel begins with Julian in the years to come. And indeed adultery seems to be plaguing him mightily, both his own and that of his wife. Among the many ideas explored in the novel are whether or not actions take their moral color from how you feel when committing them rather than from their effects on others; whether or not life is an occasion for the pursuing of personal fulfillment or the fulfillment of the needs of others; whether we can love people as they really are, rather than as we wish them to be; and whether or not an artist should, as Flaubert advised, be regular and orderly in his life like a good bourgeois, so that he may be violent and original in his work.

[1] A BOTTLE IN THE SMOKE, by *A.N. Wilson*. Viking. $18.95.

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The latter question is explored early in the novel when Julian, not knowing what to make of his life, takes up employment in the Accounts Department of Tempest and Holmes, a shirt manufacturer. There he encounters a superior, a Mr. Pilbright, who at work was a perfect martinet, yet at home was a wildly original painter. The man secretly kept his two lives separate for decades. Julian, on the other hand, desires to unite his livelihood with his art. Only he isn't certain which art is his—writing or acting. Quitting the shirt concern, he dabbles in both while serving as a bartender in a seedy, bohemian bar.

Wilson's cast of characters is large, as is his canvas. The novel moves from actors' rooming houses to publishing houses, actors' dressing rooms to Mayfair drawing rooms, private clubs to the world of the private manuscript collector. One of the most hilarious characters Wilson has created is Julian's Uncle Roy, who lives for his exposure to the aristocratic Lampitt family. And one of Wilson's most touching characters is also here, Day Muckley, a washed-up popular novelist who survives on ego and alcohol, a wag who can compare going to confession with "a real dose of syrup of figs. Cleanses you. Empties it all out."

I can only say I am impatient for the third installment of Wilson's wise and witty trilogy. If it measures up to its predecessors, Wilson will have given us a considerable achievement in contemporary fiction—one that is funny, wise, and above all, thought-provoking.

It was Ralph Waldo Emerson who stated, inscrutably, "Treat men and women as if they were real; perhaps they are." John McGahern's first novel in a decade is, in size, a small affair, just 184 pages.[2] But in it he takes up the large issue of the fragile relations between the sexes—the difficulty of understanding one another, the impossibility of total commitment, the certainty of disappointment.

The figure about whom the novel revolves is Michael Moran, a disillusioned Irish Republican and curmudgeon. Moran despises what Ireland has become. Once a successful soldier, he now runs his farm, "Great Meadow," as if it were his fortress against encroaching values by which he is affronted. To move about in his house is like moving about in a war zone. Moran purposefully distances himself from others, because to yield to intimacy is to lose control: " 'The closest I ever got to any man was when I had him in the sights of the rifle and I never missed.' The voice was so absent and tired that it took some of the chill from the words." His unyielding nature causes grief among his three obedient daughters, his two disobedient sons, and his ameliorating second wife, Rose.

The novel's plot is concerned with the gradual clearing of the nest. At first it appears that only women can live with the old man. But one

[2] AMONGST WOMEN, by *John McGahern*. Viking. $17.95.

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by one the daughters take their leave until he is left only with his blind pride and his younger wife. The book may be read as an allegory for an Ireland that drives all its sons and daughters away. Moran is more than a bit of a monster, and it is to McGahern's credit that the reader is able to sympathize with him to the extent one does. McGahern clearly cares for him and for all his characters. Behind Moran's stubbornness we comprehend racial fear of the poorhouse, an understandable and sympathetic trait.

McGahern has dealt with what is within his reach, and the modesty of the book's scope is in reverse proportion to what he has seen in it, and how deeply he was able to see. He has given this farm, this family, a sense of timelessness. One could be reading Hardy, one could be reading early Lawrence. McGahern's wrenboys seem from the same period as his predecessors' hay trussers and furmity women. Only on occasion is the prose marred by some sloppy writing, as in his description of the aftermath of harvesting, when within six lines of narration he tells us twice, "every muscle ached," and describes his workers the next morning as "stiff as boards." This is not one of his characters speaking; this is the authorial voice. Despite such patches, I recommend the novel to anyone who has tired of the trendy and wants to return to a good old-fashioned read.

Quite in contrast is the latest Vonnegut, the writer's seventeenth book.[3] In closing it, I was reminded of John Jay Chapman's remark: "When I put down a book by Stevenson, I swear I am hungry for something to read." Kurt Vonnegut's book left me hungry indeed; it is almost totally devoid of some standard ingredients of fiction—dialogue, form, confrontation, coherent plot. The author relies almost totally on the narrator and his one point of view. And the narration comes to us tricked-up with "unconventional lines separating passages within chapters" which "indicate where one scrap ended and the next began. The shorter the passage, the shorter the scrap" ("Editor's Note," p. 7). The narrator did not have access to uniform writing paper, see? The writer, locked up in a library and facing trial, was desperate to express himself. His name, Eugene Debs Hartke, is clue to Vonnegut's social concerns within the novel. Anyone who owns an aging VW Beetle is fine. The narrator manages to disparage rich kids, Japanese entrepreneurs and all prosperous foreigners, optimists, and people who are mentally ill. At one point the narrator's wife and mother-in-law are both carted off to an asylum, much to his relief. The narrator's definition of high art is, "Making the most of the raw materials of futility."

The snippet-technique soon begins to wear. One card or shard reads, in its entirety, "Vietnam." Another states grandly, "There is so much we

[3] HOCUS POCUS, by *Kurt Vonnegut*. G.P. Putnam's Sons. $21.95.

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have to learn about TV!" And because the narrator has developed TB, many cards are devoted to his cough: "Cough, cough. Silence. Two more; Cough, cough. There. I'm ok now. Cough. That's it. I really am OK now. Peace." One wonders what the author would have put on the paper had the narrator suffered from, say, postnasal drip?

The author's, or the narrator's, international vision embraces such statements as, "All nations bigger than Denmark are crocks of doo-doo." Such euphemisms fill the book with cuteness. Repeatedly he refers to when "the excrement hit the air-conditioning in Vietnam." Either Vonnegut wants to make sure he makes his point, or he is unaware of his repetitiousness; how many times need we be told that the Chemistry Department of Harvard University developed napalm?

One has to admit Vonnegut is capable of provoking a smile, as when he describes some natives as being "just as white as Nancy Reagan." But the slap-dash quality of *Hocus Pocus* is disconcerting. For instance, "After Lyle Hooper was executed, with a bullet behind the ear, I visited the Trustees in the stable. Tex Johnson was still spiked to the cross-timbers in the loft overhead, and they knew it. But before I tell about that, I had better finish my story of how I got a job in Athena."

Vonnegut's penchant for reiterating a phrase ("And so it goes," was the litany in *Slaughterhouse-Five*) is here reduced to "What a planet!" His inventive powers seem to be wearing thin. It is difficult to disagree with his fine ecological feelings in *Hocus Pocus*. On the other hand, it was André Gide who observed, "Fine feelings are the stuff that bad literature is made of."

It would be felicitous to report that Alfred Chester's *Head of a Sad Angel: Stories 1953-1966* has rescued from oblivion the work of a neglected genius.[4] Edited by Edward Field, estimable poet and long-time friend of Chester's, and with a brief foreword by Gore Vidal, the 377-page book puts back into print thirteen stories, some of considerable length. Moreover, there is an appendix, "Alfred Chester Remembered," which contains biographical sketches, memoirs and letters.

With notable exceptions, I found the appendix more riveting and moving than the majority of the stories. In these final pages one encounters Chester himself—prematurely bald, aggressively unattractive, temperamentally impossible, pursued by voices and little green men, avoiding everyone he knew. In short, a walking disaster.

In his "Foreword," five short paragraphs of a rather grudging nature, Vidal focusses on Chester's homosexual themes, "The quest for Love through Cock is often settled for with unseemly haste." This seems to me to do Chester and the book a disservice, for the four best stories are not concerned with gay life at all. This is not to say Chester can't be classified as a writer of gay fiction. But he did not work exclusively in that vineyard.

[4] HEAD OF A SAD ANGEL: Stories 1953-1966, by *Alfred Chester*. Ed. by *Edward Field*, Foreword by *Gore Vidal*. Black Sparrow Press. $25.00; $15.00.

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The title story, "Head of a Sad Angel," seems to me the best work Chester achieved besides his 1956 novel, *Jamie Is My Heart's Desire*. It is a 32-page account of the relationships among the narrator, a struggling piano student in Paris; his teacher, Countess Katherine de Charski; and Claudio, another of the Countess' students who has completely fooled her into thinking his entire life is music, when in fact he is a womanizer and a charlatan. The Countess demands nothing less than complete devotion, and expects the narrator to pay her rent and utility bills in exchange for her genius. Her particular muse is Chopin, and she fancies herself as the last exponent of the Chopin tradition. After an argument with the narrator, she renounces the student as an egoist and an American with no culture. She goes to Père Lachaise Cemetery to hide and grieve all night on Chopin's grave. The story ends in commanding last sentences:

"Thus I waited, while the rain fell, then stopped, then fell again, while the smell of the *pissotières* clogged the air, while the gaslight haunted the ivy and the street, while I almost forgot why I waited or for whom—remembering only that morning must come and that, even unbribed, the watchman would descend from his tower and swing open the gates to let all the mourners in." The mourners, of course, include the narrator, who knows the frail Countess was incapable of surviving the night in the rain and the cold.

The other three fine stories are "Cradle Song," the narrative in dialect of an ignorant girl in love with a railroad engineer; "Here Be Dragons," about the fears that possess parents and children alike; and "Beds and Boards," about a failed marriage which is symbolically telegraphed when the husband decides to axe and burn all their household furniture rather than store or move it: "There was nothing in the room but splinters, a bed, two glasses, a bottle of Spumante in a casserole full of water, a man, and a woman. Tomorrow the woman would be gone, and, so thinking, he felt a rush of love. For, he reflected, perhaps love is only the moment before separation."

These are tender stories, their epiphanies well-earned. The remainder, pieces like "Behold Goliath" and "The Foot" are uneven, episodic, shrill and often campy. Some of the short sections achieve moments of grace, such as the "Furniture" section of "Behold Goliath" and the "February 26" section of "The Foot," which clearly is an autobiographical account of Chester's self-consciousness over baldness and wearing wigs. But the sums are less than the parts. The attempted episodic novellas do not coalesce into clear wholes. Still, to have authored the four stories cited above is no small achievement, and if this book does not trigger a Chester revival, it may still gain the author some new admirers.

Until now I was unfamiliar with the fiction of B. H. Friedman, though the front matter of this collection lists six novels and an earlier collection of stories, *Coming Close*. What I had read were his two

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biographies, *Jackson Pollock: Energy Made Visible*, and *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney*, the latter written with Flora Biddle. The Pollock biography had especially impressed me, combining skillfully biography, art criticism, and psychoanalysis.

Friedman brings his knowledge of the art world to play in many of these stories, which range in time from the 1940s to the 1980s, and the protagonists range from youths to geriatrics.[5] Among the book's solid achievements are "Reunion in Spain," concerning an art critic and a painter. She is always trying to intellectualize his work, to wrap it in words like "whiplash line" or "frontal attack." He on the other hand explains that his work is simply about paint—"paint's color, thickness, juiciness." As the two become more involved, their relationship is at first nourishing, but it finally consumes the talent and individuality of both.

Another painterly story, "Did You Know Gorky? Pollock? Kline?," contrasts the pretensions of a pair of collectors with the seriousness of a painter, allegedly "one of those Abstract Expressionists, left over from the Fifties, an old Ab.Ex. beard and all, forty or so, out of things." Within a mere seven pages, their preconceptions of the painter are exposed as totally wrong-headed and their own values, symbolized by their latest purchase of a "plastic cube full of mirrors glittering under a spotlight," to be shallow. Friedman makes us sympathize with the painter, while at the same time he creates the collectors' world with great authority: "The Castelli posters, the cartoon blow-ups, the trembling hard-edge images, everything he hated most in this 1967 world which was moving too fast from inner to outer space . . ."

Things—articles and artifacts—are important to Friedman's characters. "Duplex" is about a couple who are attempting a trial separation while remaining in the same apartment. The husband says of the duplex, "You've wrecked it. I've given in too many times. We had an understanding once—checks and balances, mutual approval—but now the place is yours, all the clutter, all the mess. I wanted serious art, serious furniture. You decorate as if you were running an orphanage. Here, every foundling has a home." Her pieces of furniture are her surrogate children. . . . A single piece of furniture, a large black horsehair sofa, is at the center of the conflict and resolution of "The Couch," a moving story about one girl's attachment to her past. The title story is concerned with a man's fight for his life and his realization of how much of his essential identity he has lost in the process. By the last paragraph he is literally as well as psychologically naked. Friedman is more versatile than these comments may indicate. "P___: A Case History," for example, is a Kafkaesque, metaphorical tale in which every man's sexual fantasy

[5] BETWEEN FLAGS: Uncollected Stories, by *B.H. Friedman*. Fiction Collective Two. $18.95; $8.95.

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turns into one man's horror, victim of continual priapism. These stories are inventive, energetic, and help define the times we live in.

The stories of Charles Baxter are, for the most part, so laid back, so understated, so subtle, one might miss their message or their power. Perhaps that is why his publisher has brought out some big guns to provide jacket comments.[6] The book appears with no fewer than seven blurbs—from Ann Beattie, Hilma Wolitzer, James Robison, Tim O'Brien, Michael Dorris, Richard Bausch, and Francine Prose—a sort of Who's Who on the *au courant* fiction scene today. With their minimalism, but especially their humanity and compassion for the working class, Baxter's stories remind me more of those of the late Raymond Carver than any of his blurbers.

Like Carver's, his stories are written in the simplest style, the language of every day, but with an eye for the telling detail. In one a young street person is taken into a volunteer's house, only to ridicule the lifestyle of the man and his family: "I didn't have any dreams until today . . . but now I do, seeing your cute house and your cute family. Here's what I'd like to do. I want to be *just like all of you.* I'd put on a chef's hat and stand outside in my apron like one of those assholes you see in the Sunday magazine section with a spatula in his hand, and, like, I'll be flipping hamburgers and telling my kids to keep their hands off the chive dip and go run in the sprinkler or do some shit like that . . . Oh, and we've sprayed the yard with that bug spray that kills anything that moves, and all the flies and mosquitoes and bunnies are dead at our feet. Talk about the good life. That has to be it."

A stereotype? Of course. But the reason things become stereotypes is that they are true. This story, "Shelters," for all its veracity, unfortunately telegraphs its conclusion pages before the end. When the street person looks up at the skylight in the bakery and asks, "Ever been broken into?," we know sure as God's in his Heaven the young man will come back and rob the bakery via the skylight. Just as in "Westend," when the social worker is asked to dispose of his down-at-the-heels friend's gun, we know he is going to use it himself. As Chekov said, If you plant a gun on the mantel in act one, it has to go off by act three. Baxter is true to dramatic unity, but whenever he gets into a heavily plotted story, he becomes obvious.

Better are "The Old Fascist in Retirement," a story loosely based on the last years of Ezra Pound in Venice, and one which rivals John Cheever's Pound story, "The World of Apples"; "Snow," which accurately recreates the boredom of being twelve years old; and "The Disappeared," in which America and Detroit are seen through the eyes of a visitor from Sweden. These stories are poetic in the best

[6] A RELATIVE STRANGER, by *Charles Baxter.* W.W. Norton. $17.95.

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sense of that word, and it does not surprise that Mr. Baxter is also author of *Imaginary Paintings*, a fine book of poems.

The jacket illustration by Robert Anderson for Steve Yarbrough's first story collection depicts a quaint small town, and indeed all the tales are set in the hamlet of Indianola in the South.[7] Like Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, the collection has a novelistic air; characters and locations reappear from story to story. Yarbrough not only has a strong sense of place—sense of place is a theme central to the book. So much so, that two love stories with different characters and conflicts revolve about the notion that love and a sense of place are more important than career. In the better of these, "Between Now and Then," a high school football coach opts to stay at his secondary school job when offered the position of his dreams coaching college football. To do so he would have had to give up the woman with whom he has fallen in love, and her son. He also has an epiphany:

> Until now, Larkin had thought career high-school coaches lacked some essential ingredient; it was this deficiency that made them what they were. But when he stood near the wrought-iron fence and stared at the stadium, he formed a new opinion. It took something extra to do a good job year after year in a place like this. You had to believe in the divinity of effort.

Renunciation also is at the heart of "Born Again," a story which first appeared in *The Hudson Review*. Lela, a barmaid, turns her back on Beer Smith, a good man who had given her some sense of being and well-being, by offering her a job in his establishment. She does so because she no longer wants to work in a bar; she has started going to church. She has gotten saved. When Beer Smith asks her, Saved "from what?" she replies, "I'm not sure."

This exchange typifies Yarbrough's characters, who are ordinary individuals involved in ordinary relationships which nevertheless perplex and often overwhelm them. Yet Yarbrough is an upbeat writer. His paralyzed country and western singer, who attempts suicide after he discovers his wife is cheating on him, comes to terms with his debility and his marriage. He begins to court his wife again. The put-upon son-in-law in "The Right Kind of Person" reconciles himself to taking care of his mother-in-law, and does so with love and grace.

Yarbrough tells his tales in simple language, sometimes spiced with a homely metaphor, as when an old woman feels "weaker than most folks' faith." I will reread these eleven stories again and again, and LSU Press is to be congratulated for making possible the debut of a fine young writer.

[7] FAMILY MAN, by *Steve Yarbrough*. Louisiana State University Press. $17.95.

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As a postscript to this chronicle, let me call attention to the publication of Charlie Smith's *The Lives of the Dead*,[8] and the fact that a remarkable literary career is unfolding before us. In just a few years Smith has published three novels, three novellas, and two collections of poetry. The author, who is forty-three, obviously has hit his stride. One is reminded of Faulkner, who between 1929 and 1932 published *Sartoris*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Sanctuary*, and *Light in August*—the first two in the same year—1929. Readers may have their individual preferences, but these works undeniably constitute a whole.

So it is with Smith. To date, I think his best is *Shine Hawk*, his long 1988 novel of a *ménage à trois* fallen from grace. With its mythical burial journey, it even superficially resembles *As I Lay Dying*. Limited to the psyches of just three characters, and with a simple linear plot, the novel allowed Smith to explore his characters in great depth.

The Lives of the Dead, on the other hand, is a complex tapestry with many characters, many plots and subplots. It necessarily is more diffuse, and for this reader, less satisfying. The notion of a filmmaker named Buddy living within his own latest, unfunded *film noir* is a brilliant one, and Smith brings this off with flourishes. The unexpected and unsettling shifts from reality to imagination give the novel an uncommon texture. Brilliant too are Smith's characterizations of Bess, Buddy's bovine ex-wife; R.B., her obsessed brother; and D'Nel Boyd, a living Prince of Darkness—a role that seems made for Dean Stockwell in the film version. And as before, Smith's language dazzles. Every description forces the reader to participate. Here is a simple bath scene:

> The lights in the bathroom did not work so I took a shower in the dark. The stall—painted metal that rang when I bumped it—smelled of the ocean, of old iron and iodine and the faint almost fecal stench that I imagined was the smell of the deep-sea vaults where the life of the world creates itself. I closed my eyes so I could feel a darkness inside the darkness.

What goes wrong for me, and earlier critics of the book as well, is Buddy's bloodbath in the last pages of the novel. Mankind having failed to support his dream, Buddy annihilates all mankind within reach, making him one of the least loveable characters in recent literary history, a sort of Bonnieless Clyde. And that, as Kurt Vonnegut doubtless would say, is when the excrement hits the air-conditioner.

It doesn't matter in the long run. Smith won't be judged by this book alone. He seems committed to creating remarkable and dense fictions, and this novel is but one in a procession. There is every evidence he will extend the scope and complexities of the legends that obsess him with all their dark anguish and guilt, their corruption and brutal grandeur. I look forward to whatever he writes next.

[8] THE LIVES OF THE DEAD, by *Charlie Smith*. Linden Press/Simon & Schuster. $19.95.

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JAMES FINN COTTER

Golden Codger Coleridge

There all the golden codgers lay . . .
—W. B. Yeats

EVERY GREAT MAN HAS HIS DISCIPLES, says Oscar Wilde, and it is Judas who writes the biography. In his own lifetime, the great man may try to curtail any prying into his past, as T. S. Eliot did, or like Robert Frost he may strew the path with half-truths to throw the future biographer off the scent. Autobiography may be the ideal form of deception, pretending like Henry Adams to tell the whole truth while leaving important facts unmentioned. In the eyes of many great men and women, translators are not the real traitors; biographers are bought off for thirty pieces of silver.

In his essay "Literary Biography," Richard Ellmann describes biography as essentially a social activity.[1] The biographer represents the outside world and observes the social self of his subject as it relates to other people. Autobiography remains solitary, looking from the inside out. As readers we are all outsiders. We identify with the biographer and want the untold story. We want the skeletons out of the closet and the old codger unmasked. The closer to the bone, the better.

Few authors have left such a maze of blazed trails that lead nowhere as Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Many who study his life and work end up despising him for his unreliable self-disclosures, his plagiarism, opium addiction, sexual fantasies, marital fecklessness, political apostasy, and religious humbug. In *Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel* (1971), Norman Fruman confesses to acute disillusion with Coleridge after tracking poetry and prose to their borrowed, unacknowledged sources. Recovering from a century of bad press and becoming in this century a major poet and literary critic, Coleridge has recently been seen as a clever codger whose veracity is tarnished by false claims and by moral failings.

Enter Richard Holmes to the rescue. *Coleridge: Early Visions*, the first of a projected two-volume biography, is an articulate, even eloquent,

[1] "Literary Biography," in *Golden Codgers: Biographical Speculations*, by Richard Ellmann (New York, 1973). The W. B. Yeats and Oscar Wilde quotations, cited above, are from this study.

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defense of the poet.[2] Quoting liberally from Coleridge's works—there are almost a thousand reference notes in the back of his book—Holmes lets Coleridge speak for himself. In the struggle between subject and biographer, Holmes wants Coleridge to triumph as the "visionary hero" of his life story, a comedy, tragedy, and romance all in one.

Coleridge's faults are not played down, although the full treatment of the complex issue of plagiarism is put off until the next volume. Holmes treats this question and other speculations in a series of scholarly footnotes that are models of condensed information and reflection. He points out that poets often collaborated with one another and published under each other's names. After his stay in Germany, however, Coleridge began to translate poems and publish them under his own name. Later in lectures and his *Biographia Literaria,* he lifted pages from Schlegel, Schelling, and Kant without citing sources. Holmes explains this action as an effort to introduce important ideas and criticism into insular English culture: "If psychologically it was a form of kleptomania, then intellectually it was a form of smuggling valuables across a closed border."

Not everyone will be as forgiving as Holmes, but he does position the dark shadows of Coleridge's character against the light of his genius and originality. The poet was a born reader and observer. In a series of five letters to his friend Thomas Poole, written when he was twenty-five, he described the shaping events of his childhood with intense feeling for emotion and detail. Coleridge recalls himself at eight: "I read every book that came my way without distinction—and my father was very fond of me, & used to take me on his knee, and hold long conversations with me." He remembers walking with his father one winter evening and learning the names of the stars from him: "I heard him with a profound delight & admiration, but without the least mixture of wonder or incredulity. For from my early reading of Faery Tales, & Genii etc etc—my mind had been habituated *to the Vast.*"

The following year, 1781, Reverend John Coleridge died, leaving little Samuel an "orphan," a name he henceforth adopted for himself. His mother wasted no time in having him sent off to the charity school, Christ's Hospital, in London. He only saw his mother and family at brief, rare intervals after his departure, the first of many bonds to be broken throughout his life. Holmes describes this school period objectively, showing that, despite the harsh regimen, Coleridge gained a mastery of Greek, Latin, and English poetry that gave him a solid grounding for his later literary work. In his adult dreams, however, nightmares of Christ's Hospital haunted Coleridge who

[2] COLERIDGE: Early Visions, by *Richard Holmes.* Viking. $22.95.

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often woke households with his terrifying screams in the middle of the night.

In 1791 Coleridge entered Jesus College, Cambridge. Outwardly gregarious, he remained a lonely young man who blushed easily and stared emptily into space. He drank, whored, and gambled, piling up debts and quitting school to join the dragoons under the fictitious name of Silas Tomkyn Comberbache, one of the truly creative touches of these confused years. In the army he developed saddle sores and boils. Coleridge, never at a loss to detail his endless succession of ailments, described them as "dreadfully troublesome eruptions, which so grimly constellated my Posteriors."

Coleridge usually fell in love with a family of sisters and their mother, then chose one as his prime passion. Mary Evans was the first to set his heart aflame, followed by his future wife Sarah Fricker and his great unrequited love, Sarah Hutchinson, the Asra of his later poems and writings. Holmes observes that in all these relationships, the poet sought the mother and sister of his shattered childhood. Out of these experiences he began consciously to shape the archetype of the Romantic poet as a lover torn by unfulfilled longings, just as he had already defined childhood as the formative force of later life.

In his literary autobiography Coleridge asked to be judged by what he had written and not blamed for what he had merely planned to do. His projections included multi-volume translations of German literature and a history of British poetry, a life of Lessing, operas, epic poems, tragedies, essays on Napoleon, Bowles, Godwin, Jakob Boehme. For years he kept his publishers and public waiting for his "Opus Maximum" to appear. After his death, his executors felt the notes unworthy of print, a decision that still stands. His one-time friend and later critic, William Hazlitt, ironically praised Coleridge as the master of the Prospectus. Even two of his most famous poems, "Christabel" and "Kubla Khan," are left unfinished. Holmes finds virtue in fragments, citing the brilliant prefaces to his incompleted poems where Coleridge discusses the creative process in startling new ways.

In presenting the involved, fruitful friendship of Coleridge with William Wordsworth, Holmes appears even-handed, but obviously favors his hero. In preparation for the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth had Coleridge do all the editing and arrangements for publication, only to throw out "Christabel" and to relegate "The Ancient Mariner" to the back of the collection. He also added an ungracious footnote disparaging the poem, a note Coleridge did not see until publication. How much the famous Preface owes to Coleridge will never be settled, but the essay grew out of their conversations and Coleridge described it at the time as "our joint opinions on Poetry." For Holmes, Wordsworth "had ruthlessly come to dominate the terms of the collaboration" and "exploited him as advisor and editor."

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Where debate crops up about attribution of poems, Holmes gives Coleridge the benefit of the doubt. Take this stanza, for example:

> There was a time when earth, and sea, and skies,
> The bright green vale, and forest's dark recess,
> With all things, lay before mine eyes
> In steady loveliness:
> But now I feel, on earth's uneasy scene,
> Such sorrows as will never cease,—
> I only ask for peace;
> If I must live to know that such a time has been!

The lines form the second stanza of "The Mad Monk." They sound so similar to the opening of the "Intimations of Immortality" ode that most readers immediately identify them with Wordsworth. Under his own name, Coleridge published "The Mad Monk" in an 1804 anthology, and Holmes states that Wordsworth never reclaimed it. True, but neither did Coleridge ever republish it among his poems. The inner evidence of style and content lends much more credence to Wordsworth's authorship.

In extracts from his Notebooks, Coleridge convinces us of his originality as an observer of nature and people. A picnic on an island on Grasmere Lake embodies a timeless ritual celebrating summer and companionship:

> I lay & saw the wood, & mountains, & lake all trembling, and as it were *idealized* thro' the subtle smoke which rose up from the clear red embers of the fir-apples which we had collected. Afterwards, we made a glorious Bonfire on the Margin, by some alder bushes, whose twigs heaved & sobbed in the uprushing column of smoke—& the Image of the Bonfire, & of us that danced round it—ruddy laughing faces in the twilight—the Image of this in a Lake smooth as that sea, to whose waves the Son of God had said, PEACE!

Coleridge's Christian sense of the divine penetration into daily events, where the natural fuses into the transcendent, makes such descriptive passages astonishing and unique to him. Myth becomes incarnate in the dance around the evening fire, faces and flames reflected in the lake. It is a vision that Dante imagined and William Blake prized.

Holmes cherishes such scenes from the Lake District. To recapture walking the fells and hills as the poet knew them he has hiked the paths and climbed the hills in his hero's footsteps. He even clambered out on the roof at Greta Hall in Keswick as Coleridge did when he first arrived there, and he learned to sail like the Ancient Mariner. He writes with humor and affection, noting that the clergyman who preceded John Coleridge at Ottery St. Mary was a Reverend Richard

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Holmes MA, "a man who has left no significant trace." (No biography for his namesake!)

Holmes understands Coleridge's political development and explains it as part of his growth as a concerned human being. His plan to form a Pantisocratic group with Robert Southey, the Frickers, Robert Lovell and others is viewed as part of his desire to share in nature without greed of property or competition between individuals. Coleridge was so serious about the value of his ideals that after the plan to emigrate to Pennsylvania collapsed he tried to effect social change through his own journal, the *Watchman.* Although two-thirds of the paper was made up of materials from other sources (often unacknowledged), Coleridge wrote the editorial commentary and managed the publication single-handedly.

Another fruit of his social idealism emerges in his poetry which introduces a theme of concern for people unable to enjoy the pleasures of country scenes. "Reflections on Having left a Place of Retirement," for example, recalls the intimate rose-framed cottage by the sea at Clevedon but breaks off the reverie to return to "brother man" who toils and bleeds in the industrialized cities. The poet vows "to fight the bloodless fight / Of Science, Freedom, and the Truth in Christ."

In one of his most convincing poems, "Frost at Midnight," Coleridge addresses his infant son Hartley, contrasting his own city-pent childhood "'mid cloisters dim" with his son's upbringing by "lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags / Of ancient mountains." His child shall see and hear in all parts of the natural world:

> The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
> Of that eternal language, which thy God
> Utters, who from eternity doth teach
> Himself in all, and all things in himself.

The child's experience of nature and learning of language are here unified and universalized in Coleridge's moving vision.

The wording of the world by the Word, a Christian belief foreign to Wordsworth's view of nature, permeates Coleridge's approach to nature and language. Holmes argues that the mystery here is central to our understanding of "Dejection: an Ode" and Coleridge's vision of creativity as a gift from God, an echo and image of his Being. In lines added to "The Eolian Harp" in 1817, the poet summed up his remembered vision:

> O! the one Life within us and abroad,
> Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
> A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,
> Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where—

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> Methinks, it should have been impossible
> Not to love all things in a world so fill'd;
> Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air
> Is Music slumbering on her instrument.

Coleridge the poet-philosopher speaks out in these lines with convincing authority and emotion.

Had Coleridge died in 1804 at the midpoint of his sixty-two years, where Holmes ends his first volume, his life might appear quite differently to us. Instead of the failure, plagiarist, apostate, opium addict, and old codger whom his critics have condemned, he would be the golden youth, the Romantic poet cut down in his prime like Keats, Shelley, and Byron. Paradoxically, that Coleridge might seem to be greater than the man he lived to become. But, as Holmes states in an ironic Postscript, biography is not fiction; it cannot stop at the climactic moment. It must move on with the burden and authority of truth.

Readers of this first volume can look forward in the second to a compelling continuation of the Coleridge story.

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EMILY GROSHOLZ

Two Perspectives on Romanticism

EUROPEAN ROMANTICISM IS COMMONLY REGARDED AS a response to the failure of the Enlightenment. For if the *siècle des lumières* had been reduced to the grim bonfire of the French Revolution, what writer could again take seriously the claims of reason to master human affairs? The two books I will consider in this review are opposed on this issue because of certain commitments deeply embedded in the critical traditions chosen by each author. The reflective deconstruction pursued by Carol Jacobs in *Uncontainable Romanticism*[1] is wary of reason, since regulation so easily becomes tyranny. Thus she reads Shelley, Emily Brontë and especially Kleist as hostile to the pretensions of enlightenment, and stresses the open-ended, "uncontainable" creativity of reading as well as writing. By contrast, Theodore Ziolkowski in *German Romanticism and Its Institutions*[2] subscribes to an historicism founded upon and enriched by the canon of historical fact. Assuming the rationality of history as an already orderly and accessible human enterprise, Ziolkowski reads the German Romantics in the context of social institutions that impinged upon them and upon which they pronounced: mining, the law, mental hospitals, universities and museums. He thus presents these writers as favorable to institutionalized reason, and himself as a reader faithful to an already established historical record.

To criticize the critics, I would like to find a middle ground between the deconstructionist's tendency to scepticism and the historicist's tendency to dogmatism. (In this wish I'm sure I'm not alone.) However, such critical demurral should be prefaced by an appreciation of the special plausibility of both methods, which in turn may make clearer their limitations. Jacobs' approach, for example, provides especially brilliant readings of certain plays and stories by Kleist, who was after all in personality and art as anarchic as he was inspired. But despite the revealing interpretations she gives of *Wuthering Heights* and *Prometheus Unbound*, Jacobs underestimates Brontë's moral concerns and overestimates Shelley's intellectual gifts, for she is too intent on exhibiting elements that destabilize the texts. Ziolkowski cannot fail to impress the reader with a breadth of erudition that

[1] UNCONTAINABLE ROMANTICISM, by *Carol Jacobs*. Johns Hopkins University Press. $29.95.

[2] GERMAN ROMANTICISM AND ITS INSTITUTIONS, by *Theodore Ziolkowski*. Princeton University Press. $45.00.

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reveals fascinating intersections in the life and works of an artist: how Goethe's long-standing interest in medicine influences the portrayal of madness in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, how E. T. A. Hoffmann's career as a jurist and his ability as a graphic artist generate recurrent legal and artistic themes in his stories. But because Ziolkowski is too intent on providing explanatory closure, he fails to acknowledge the real strangeness of Kleist and the ambiguity of figures like Hoffmann, whose lifelong involvement with the law was fraught with disappointment and distaste.

Jacobs addresses the riddle of Kleist's literary intentions in the last half of *Uncontainable Romanticism*, where she analyzes two plays (*Penthesilea* and *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*) and a variety of stories, long and short: "Michael Kolhaas," "Der Zweikampf," "Der Findling," and the very brief but revealing "Unwahrscheinliche Wahrhaftigkeiten." By focussing on aspects of the text that seem especially puzzling or anomalous and at the same time charting subtle shifts in its language, she offers startlingly original and yet convincing interpretations which, taken together, reveal Kleist as one of the most important writers of his era. For if her reading is correct, Kleist is already far ahead of his twentieth-century critics, undermining both the dogmatic pretentions of historicism and the (potentially dogmatic) scepticism of deconstruction.

In *Penthesilea*, for example, the "reason" of the Greeks that rests upon the stable and definable oppositions between Greek and Trojan, love and war, woman and man, is initially undermined by the third term of the Amazons who are hostile to both camps and cannot be drawn into any alliance. But the play does not therefore simply move between Greek reason and Amazonian madness, or to put the matter more linguistically, between Greek literality and Amazonian metaphor. Rather, the action of the play forces literal and figurative language to collide "like two enraged wolves each with its fang in the throat of the other," as the lovers Achilles and Penthesilea fall progressively deeper into misunderstanding and a doom that both reveals and cancels the truth of their bloody romance. When Penthesilea uses violence as a metaphor for desire, Achilles can only take her intention as war; but when he attempts to engage her through metaphorical surrender and a merely theatrical proposal of renewed struggle, she can only respond with literal violence.

In the heat of warfare thus bewilderingly staged, Penthesilea kills her lover and so precipitates the crisis of meaning that occupies the last quarter of the play. As Jacobs observes, "And this is where the true madness begins, where both the difficult truce and the difficult battle between hillside and hollow disintegrate, disintegrate into what, after all, approaches the coming together of the literal and the figurative and of lucidity and insanity." This is an extraordinary claim. What can give a critic the right to say of Kleist's play that its protagonist, raving over the body of her dead adversary-lover, no

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longer speaks of anything outside language (upsetting the order of both literality and metaphor) and confounds "her moment of clearest insight and that of utter derangement"?

Only that this claim makes recognizable and meaningful, even in the midst of meaning's crisis, the course of the play and its stunning final speech. For in Penthesilea's death scene, Kleist leads his heroine to die by her own word, to perform her own death: she gives the real dagger to her friend Prothoe and makes another one, equally lethal, out of speech.

> For now I climb down into my breast,
> Like a shaft, and dig forth for myself, cold
> Like ore, an annihilating feeling.
> This ore, I purify in the fires of woe
> Hard, for myself, to steel; steep it then,
> With the hot corroding venom of remorse,
> through and through;
> Carry it then to hope's eternal anvil,
> And whet and sharpen it for me to a dagger;
> And to this dagger now I reach my breast:
> Thus! Thus! Thus! Thus! And once more.
> Now it is good.
> [*She falls and dies.*]

Finally beyond the errors of passion, rhetoric and madness, Penthesilea speaks the truth. This truth however is not literal; it does not correspond to reality but creates (and cancels) reality. Nor is it metaphorical; its power to engender is substantial, not figurative, at least within the reality of the stage.

Penthesilea's death must be one of the most uncanny in the history of theater, and Jacobs' deconstructionist analysis does full justice to it. Likewise, her highly refined instinct for the importance of anomaly in a text opens a new perspective on "Michael Kohlhaas," a story often taught to European schoolchildren as a fable about respect for the law. (Indeed, Ziolkowski cites it as an example of Kleist's approbation of the Prussian legal code.) But Jacobs orients her reading around the subplot of the gypsy woman, a character so enigmatic that some editors have excised her from the story altogether. At the end of the tale, the Elector of Brandenburg is supposed to be the impartial dispenser of justice, the final authority. But the gypsy woman has already put him in his place, making his authority dependent on her powers of prophecy and then revealing prophecy as an empty and yet binding formal condition. And Kohlhaas' final act concerns a set of written predictions about the Elector of Saxony given to him earlier by the gypsy; learning that the Elector is poised to retrieve them after his execution, Kohlhaas reads and swallows them at the last moment, just before he is beheaded. With this, Jacobs notes, Kohlhaas finally pushes his rebellion beyond all the legal structures he once honored.

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Caught between the anarchic poor and inscrutable Necessity, ambiguously related to each other and their emperor, Kleist's Electors are far from being figures of uncontested legal authority.

Yet the search for the anomalous, the unsettling, may be carried too far. In her essay on *Wuthering Heights*, Jacobs gives a compelling reading of what may be the novel's most memorable scene, the episode where Lockwood encounters the ghost of Catherine. In this scene, the new tenant at Thrushcross Grange finds himself stranded at Wuthering Heights and tries to sleep in Catherine's bed, closed in by the books and writings of its former inhabitant. His sleep is troubled by dreams and finally broken by the ghost of the dead girl-woman herself: in retrospect Lockwood is careful to write this encounter off as a dream, while Heathcliff embraces it as a reality whose truth he will shortly affirm by dying of it. In her treatment of the passage, Jacobs takes issue with more conventional readings (like that of Frank Kermode) which view the book as having a happy ending once true names and true inheritances are restored in the second generation. Through a provocative account of the linguistic and bookish motifs in the passage, she shows how Emily Brontë calls Lockwood into question as a narrator. And on the basis of his unreliability Jacobs questions whether the novel's outcome can be as cheerful as it appears. "Kermode's interpretation, as radical as it often seems, operates in strange complicity with Lockwood's . . . If we look to the actual functioning of names and the pattern of inheritance within the text, they promise neither a restored rationality nor the comfortable coexistence of equally valid forces."

The ensuing discussion emphasizes Lockwood's callow oversimplifying, but it skirts the issues raised by the second important narrator, Nelly Dean. Nelly certainly misunderstands both Catherine and Heathcliff, and yet she grasps the fate of the intertwined families (I would argue) better than anyone else in the novel. She is a loyal servant, a literate spokeswoman and a genuinely empathetic soul whose deep affection for the two children she raises, Hareton and the second Catherine, redeems and reunites them. She represents, I think, a possibility of human wholeness that lies between the romantic lacerations of Catherine and Heathcliff and the stolid fixity of Lockwood, who seems to have no capacity to suffer, grow or love. The intervention of her voice produces an ending as happy as the haunted and quiet earth can give.

Ziolkowski's view of things is generally more optimistic and less complicated that Jacobs'. It is difficult to avoid reading nineteenth-century German culture in the harsh backward light of the twentieth, but Ziolkowski tries very hard not to be inversely whiggish and his picture of how the Germans invented or reinvented various institutions is quite attractive. He conveys the sense of energy and idealism that fueled Schiller and Goethe, Fichte and Hegel, Hoffmann and Novalis. And he argues persuasively that the German Romantics as a group regarded their social and political institutions as tractable, useful and germane to the life of the mind. They actively engaged

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those institutions, trusted in their reasonableness, and made them the focus of an astonishing number of literary works.

Each of the five central chapters of this book develops a thesis of intrinsic interest. In the chapter on the museum, for instance, Ziolkowski prefaces a long discussion of the artist as hero and the gallery as dramatic setting in a variety of fictional works with a detailed explanation of how the museum came to play the role of "temple of art" in German culture. The dominant figure in his explanation is naturally Hegel, who made the linkage of art and religion a central feature of his grand philosophical scheme. But Hegel was only giving explicit, systematic expression to a Romantic notion that had been widespread for decades. Ziolkowski quotes a striking passage from *Dichtung und Wahrheit* in which Goethe describes his feelings upon entering a gallery in Dresden in 1768 as similar to those "with which one enters a house of God, all the more so because the décor of many a temple, the object of many a reverence was displayed here once again, but only for the sacred purpose of art." Schinkel's Altes Museum in Berlin with its temple design is the crowning (and, as Ziolkowski shows, quite self-conscious) architectural expression of this belief.

But perhaps the most revealing chapter is the one that treats German legal institutions during the Romantic era. Whereas in France, England and the United States preparation for a career in the law was a practical apprenticeship, in Germany it was a course of university study that, *faute de mieux*, attracted many important literary and philosophical minds. Goethe, Kleist, Novalis, Clemens Brentano (brother-in-law of the brilliant jurist Savigny), Eichendorff, the brothers Grimm and E. T. A. Hoffmann all had some kind of formal training in the law. Part of the melancholy of Goethe's *Werther* is due to the tension between his career as a lawyer and his poetic aspirations, a tension that also shaped the life of his author though without such damaging effects.

Jurists had been trying to systematize the motley of German municipal, provincial and imperial law since the Middle Ages, sometimes through appeal to Roman and canon law, latterly through the doctrine of natural law favored by the Enlightenment. The Romantics however turned to codifications of existing positive law. On Ziolkowski's account, the most popular candidate for this function was the *Allgemeines Landrecht*, the Prussian Code of 1794.

Aside from the eight-year Napoleonic occupation of Prussia, Hoffmann worked in the Prussian legal service all his life where he consistently won praise for his skill, precision and thoroughness. Ziolkowski points out that Hoffmann's experience as a jurist is woven through his tales, and quotes him as saying that "no writer desists from his métier but delights in depictions from it." The pervasiveness of legal motifs in Hoffmann's literary output is indeed striking, particularly in the stories written in Berlin after 1814. The intricacies of a legal process are given in *Die Elixiere des Teufels*, significant

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historical cases in "Ignaz Denner" and "Die Marquise de la Pivardiere," ironic legal commentary in the fairy tales *Meister Floh* and *Klein Saches*. The *Allgemeines Landrecht* is cited frequently in his literary works, and for the most part its invocation seems consistent with his conscientious career as a Prussian civil servant.

Likewise, Ziolkowski argues, Heinrich von Kleist repeatedly used legal facts and settings in his fiction. Rejecting the natural law that had attracted him in his youth, he became more and more attracted to the Prussian legal code. Ziolkowski concludes, "Kleist was driven by the same rage for order that motivated many of his contemporaries at the time of the crisis in Prussia and the Romantic revaluation of all values. As a Prussian he believed that he could find this social order in the *Allgemeines Landrecht* and, by analogy, in the positive law of any society that he portrayed in his works." In "Michael Kohlhaas," "Der zerbrochne Krug" and "Das Erdbeben in Chili," Ziolkowski finds dramatic resolution in the final reaffirmations of the law of the land.

This way of relating elements of the texts of (for example) Hoffmann and Kleist to legal institutions reveals a great deal that would otherwise remain mute or insignificant to the literary critic. Yet it also rationalizes certain features in the life and works of these authors. I have already mentioned ways in which "Michael Kohlhaas" resists a straightforwardly legalistic reading; his life can no more be taken simply as an illustration of the triumph of positive law than Penthesilea's death can be construed simply in terms of a metaphor drawn from mining technology. Such construals rule out the strangeness of Kleist's vision. And Ziolkowski himself gives the historical reference that suggests that Hoffmann's relation to the law could have been mightily complex. For at the end of his life, Hoffmann was thwarted in an important investigation and then censored and prosecuted for libel by unruly conservative elements in Friedrich Wilhelm III's Prussia. The quotation cited above was part of his self-defense, written shortly before his death, in which he denied the obvious and bitter satire of the conservative demagogues in his fairy tales.

Institutions often do have a reasonableness that need not be tyrannical; the large social structures that we create and revise with words are not merely coercive in their persistence, but also enabling. Poets and critics alike would do well to pay closer attention to the social context in which writing goes on and which it in turn helps to recreate. For writing is a special kind of empowerment. Both Ziolkowski and Jacobs call attention to that creation of power, but in complementary and sometimes incompatible ways. Ziolkowski tries to explain the text by locating it with respect to certain powerful institutions in the Romantic era; Jacobs traces how certain Romantic writers represent empowerment in the text itself. The one reads the history of the word as stable and orderly, the other as unpredictable and explosive. I suppose the most surprising and rational response in this instance is to take both books seriously.

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DAVID DOOLEY

Poetry Chronicle

IN HIS EXCELLENT INTRODUCTION to *Above the River: The Complete Poems of James Wright,*[1] Donald Hall states of his friendship with Wright, "Like any friendship among artists, ours was partly based on rivalry." Although I do not agree with Hall's general proposition, it encourages a reviewer to compare Wright's collected works with Hall's *Old and New Poems*,[2] a large selection of Hall's shorter poems. Almost anyone interested in contemporary poetry will want both books, to renew acquaintance with old favorites (Wright's "A Blessing," Hall's "Names of Horses"), to fill in gaps in our knowledge of the poets' works, and finally to assess their careers as a whole.

Both Wright and Hall, like many poets of their generation, began by writing in rhyme and meter—Wright particularly under the influence of Yeats, Hall under the influence of Auden—but broke with their earlier styles and began writing free verse. Both were influenced by surrealism, although in retrospect neither had much talent in that direction. Ultimately, each began to write more personal poems, Wright's centered around his travels in Italy and France, Hall's centered around his grandfather's farm in New Hampshire where he went to live. One significant difference: Wright died at the absurdly young age of fifty-two, while Hall is still alive and writing.

The early work of Wright now seems much stronger than the early work of Hall. After his first three books Wright seemed well on the way to becoming a major poet. His first book, *The Green Wall*, holds up surprisingly well despite the echoes of Yeats, displaying the exuberance of a young poet discovering his strength. Wright shows a talent for handling rhyme, meter, and stanza. "The Assignation" is probably the best surreal poem he ever wrote, and "Erinna to Sappho," uncharacteristically for Wright a dramatic monologue, is an unexpected delight.

Throughout Wright's career he wavers between attraction to a high rhetoric and attraction to a deliberately flat style. The lush, if sometimes diffuse, language of *The Green Wall* gives way to the more stripped-down style of *Saint Judas*, possibly influenced by E. A. Robinson poems like "The House on the Hill." The title poem of *Saint Judas*, one of Wright's very best, strikes just the right balance between

[1] ABOVE THE RIVER: The Complete Poems of James Wright, by *James Wright*. Wesleyan University Edition. $27.95.

[2] OLD AND NEW POEMS, by *Donald Hall*. Ticknor & Fields. $24.95; $12.95.

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the two impulses. "A Blessing" and "Lying in a Hammock . . . ," the free verse masterpieces from his next book, *The Branch Will Not Break*, similarly use carefully selected language that can accommodate moments of elevation. As in Pound's *Cathay*, the care with which the words are selected is itself a kind of elevation. Sven Birkerts' essay on "Lying in a Hammock . . ." in *The Electric Life* shows how Wright's rhetoric is anything but simple.

Just when Wright seemed poised for greatness, his work fell apart. Hall's introduction suggests that alcoholism and bipolar mood disorder were at least partly responsible. *Shall We Gather at the River* contains a few good poems like "Outside Fargo, North Dakota" and "In Response to a Rumor . . . ," but from here through the new poems of the 1971 *Collected Poems* to the nadir of *Two Citizens* and continuing through most of *To a Blossoming Pear Tree*, to an unnerving extent self-pity becomes Wright's muse. He loses what had previously been his greatest asset, a sense of poetic shape. Many of these poems seem like ramblings punctuated by angry and maudlin outbursts. For instance, in "A Secret Gratitude" the poet harangues us for more than two pages about how horrible human beings are because they kill deer, yet no character in the poem even attempts to kill a deer. Wright's occasional attempts in meter, like "To a Dead Drunk" and "With the Shell of a Hermit Crab," are less skillful than anything in his first book. Fortunately, his short prose poems (prose pieces, he called them) offered one way out of his artistic dilemma, and by his final book, *This Journey*, he was able to write more cohesive verse. Still, even the best work in *This Journey*, like "A Winter Daybreak Above Vence," seems a bit diffuse alongside the best of *The Branch Will Not Break*. Although Wright did not achieve all that his admirers once hoped, in a handful of poems he remains an outstanding poet. The first three and the last book, a few other poems, some of the prose pieces, and the translations of Jiménez and Neruda remain a substantial achievement.

The current view of Donald Hall's work, expressed by several critics in the collection of writings about Hall *The Day I Was Older*, is that in the long-lined free verse of *Kicking the Leaves* (1978) he surpassed all his previous work, and maintained this standard of excellence through *The Happy Man* (1986) and the book-length *The One Day* (1988). *Old and New Poems* confirms this view. Although Hall wrote some interesting early poems in meter, especially "My Son, My Executioner," to read aloud the stiff pentameter, apparently composed line by line, of "Christmas Eve in Whitneyville" and then the supple free verse of "The Hole" (the next poem in the book) shows where Hall's real strengths lie. Throughout the early work the play of mind is more interesting than the texture of the verse. Getting rid of the influence of Auden (e.g., "The worded room will yield / Your canny agony / Not excellence nor will") was pure gain. The poets who have made best use of what they learned from Auden—Larkin,

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Merrill, Wilbur, Ashbery, for instance—have themselves been brilliant technicians. Hall, at that time, was not.

Wisely, Hall has pruned a number of his middle-period surrealist poems from the collection. Hall seemed to lose his way during these years. Many of these poems are in very short lines, a style Hall has admired in poets like Robert Creeley, but again a style that does not really suit Hall's talents or needs. The love poem "Gold" is perhaps one of the better short-lined poems. If critics decided that Hall was not, after all, one of the best poets of his very gifted generation, they had reason for thinking so. Nonetheless, the thematic material of the later work is already present in lines like these from "Snow": "whatever I touch I turn / to the story of death."

In his middle period Hall plays with surrealism; in his later poems he abandons it or combines realistic and surrealistic techniques. He juxtaposes different times, places, and characters to portray the world of his childhood and to explore how all of life seems to co-exist in the eternal present of "the one day." To contrast "Great Day in the Cows' House" with the earlier pure surrealism of "The Alligator Bride" shows how much Hall gained by turning from fantasy to realism. Subjects like farm animals, bygone rural life, and "the story of death" offer wide scope for sentimentality, yet Hall usually knows where to draw the line between sentiment and sentimentality. Reading his work in conjunction with Wright's emphasizes the point even more strongly. In his later work Hall develops a fine ear, with much rich interplay of vowels and consonants.

For the reader who is new to Hall or who has not previously cared for his work, I would suggest beginning with some of the following poems: "Names of Horses," "Kicking the Leaves," "Merle Bascom's .22," "Great Day in the Cows' House," "Twelve Seasons," "The Henyard Round," "The Day I Was Older," "Photographs of China," "My Son, My Executioner," "The Hole," "Flies," the atypically grim "Wolf Knife," and the fine new poem "In Praise of Death." These poems, perhaps two dozen others, and *The One Day* form a body of work honest in emotion and skillful in technique. After reading Wright and Hall together, I now think Hall simply wrote more good poems than Wright did and ultimately has more range and depth.

Including new work in a selected or collected poems is questionable, since the purpose of a selection is to feature poems that have stood both the test of publication in an individual volume and the test of time. The new poems in Wright's 1971 *Collected Poems* are among his weakest; Hall has included too many weak efforts in his volume. The short-lined poems (the three-syllable lines of "Valley of Morning," for instance) especially are unsuccessful. Only one of Hall's new poems, "In Praise of Death," which is in the longer-than-pentameter free verse of *The One Day*, stands with his best work.

If ease of publication, ready acceptance by peers, and receipt of grants and awards, including the Pulitzer Prize, mean good fortune, then Charles Simic has been a supremely lucky poet. His Pulitzer

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Prize-winning *World Without End*[3] has now been followed by a newly enlarged version of his *Selected Poems: 1963–1983*.[4] The Pulitzer award to *World Without End* aroused considerable controversy, at least in part because most of the poems are in prose. This objection is difficult to understand, since prose poems have been part of the European poetic tradition since Baudelaire and Rimbaud. The books reviewed in this chronicle contain such excellent prose poems as James Wright's "Honey" and "Two Memories of Venice," Donald Hall's "Flies," and the section of David R. Slavitt's "The Gates of Horn" entitled "Basilio's Address from the Throne." Furthermore, those who administer the Pulitzer surely have the right to reward whomever they choose, just as the rest of us have the right to discuss the wisdom of that choice.

World Without End does contain five short poems in verse, all of them feeble. "History Lesson" may be marginally the best:

> The roaches look like
> Comic rustics
> In serious dramas.

Mildly amusing, perhaps; definitely slight. The prose poems are superior, even if they rarely rise above the level of amusing squibs. Often they begin engagingly—"The stone is a mirror which works poorly"; "He held the Beast of the Apocalypse by its tail, the stupid kid!"; "A dog with a soul, you've got that?"—but fail to develop. To be sure, Simic writes out of the surrealist tradition, which denies development and organic form, but lays the burden on the poet of being consistently entertaining from one image or sentence to the next. The best poem in the book, "Everything's foreseeable," uses a surreal framework in which to write about ordinary life. The narrator's grandmother "says there's no god, only an eye here and there that sees clearly. The neighbors are too busy watching TV to burn her as a witch."

That Simic's newer work is slight could not surprise anyone who has read his selected poems. Galway Kinnell, a poet of considerable range, confined his selected poems to 148 pages; Simic, a poet of limited range, now feels compelled to issue a selected poems of 229 pages. Simic has risked much less and accomplished much less than Wright or Hall. Whereas Wright and Hall continually questioned how to write a poem, Simic has been content to drift with the tide. Over the years he has been influenced by most of the quasi-surreal trends that came along. He has written deep image poems ("I am happy to be a stone"). He has written the three kinds of poems Robert Peters in *The Great American Poetry Bake-Off* described as "catatonic surrealism":

[3] WORLD WITHOUT END, by *Charles Simic*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. $17.95; $9.95.

[4] SELECTED POEMS: 1963–1983, by *Charles Simic*. George Braziller. $10.95p.

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instruction or recipe poems ("Dismantling the Silence"—a period title if there ever was one), poems which resemble fairy tales ("The Chicken Without a Head"), and paranoid quasi-narratives ("Begotten of the Spleen"). Simic's best work has affinities with Gary Larson's *Far Side* cartoons—for instance, the fanciful accounts of ordinary objects considered as having lives of their own ("Brooms," "Fork," "Knife"). "Eyes Fastened with Pins" imagines Death as an ordinary worker with a wife at home ironing his laundry. Simic sometimes descends to E-Z 2 Rite surrealism—e.g., "Wintry pallor and ire. / Wind's rabies. Pitchy heavens. // Apes with rice-powdered asses. / Monday moving its dentures." In *World Without End* Simic also includes deliberately nondiscursive poems in which the nondiscursiveness becomes in effect the subject of the poem as well as a fashion statement ("A century of gathering clouds" and "I knew a night owl," for instance). Poets like Simic may not tell us much about human beings or the world they live in, or about language or craftsmanship, but they do tell us a great deal about period taste.

A first book of poems should also be a selected poems. Joan Murray has chosen only ten poems for her first volume, *The Same Water*,[5] and the book profits greatly from that concision. The four longest poems in the book are also the finest; Murray's best imaginings seem to require a certain length and space. Two of the longer poems, "Coming of Age on the Harlem" and "The Unmolested Child," deal with the author's growing up in a rough neighborhood along the Harlem River. Murray's portrayal of the pre-adolescent's awakening sexuality, desire for independence, and concern for peer approval is completely convincing—candid, unsentimental, matter-of-fact. Boys "with sprouts of pubic hair" strip to swim and sunbathe while the girls "keep a coy but glancing distance," a "white-haired voyeur" masturbates, and tourists on the Circle Line boats think of Tom Sawyer and "Becky Thatcher in eyelet bloomers." Unlike the tourists, Murray has no ideal against which to measure the reality; she simply attempts to describe the scene as accurately as possible.

Murray has a remarkable talent for giving full value to her own experiences while placing them firmly within a common social context. Most poets, accurately or not, portray themselves as outsiders; Murray does not. In "The Unmolested Child" she even shows how child molesting, insanity, and murder come to seem part of a normal growing up. The apparently episodic structure of "The Unmolested Child" in fact cunningly sets up the powerful final incident. To imagine how a poet like Sharon Olds would handle this material is to appreciate Murray's achievement even more.

The other two longer poems, "The Grotte des Enfants" and "Whose Woods," are more meditative than narrative in method. "The

[5] THE SAME WATER, by *Joan Murray*. Wesleyan University Press. $20.00; $9.95.

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Grotte des Enfants" is a meditation on the image of the pietà. Once again, the structure seems episodic yet works, as the author sets her own normal experience of motherhood against more extreme examples from different times, countries, and economic conditions. The third section, about a photograph of a Turkish woman who has lost five sons in an earthquake ("If it had been art, someone would / have said: Too many"), is sure to become well-known. "Whose Woods" ties an intricate knot of human fear, historical failures, and marital tensions, but the woods are ultimately under the control of natural rather than human forces, when a tornado suddenly leaves "A valley of stumps. Shards. / No trees."

The shorter poems, except for the appealing "Larkspur," are somewhat less successful; she hasn't yet mastered the compact short poem. Her sense of line is not always sure; compare the peculiar line breaks in the last section of "Whose Woods" with the more secure handling of lineation in "Larkspur." If the metrical base of "The Unmolested Child" is the iamb, it has too many non-metrical lines; if free verse, too many regularly iambic phrases. However, in only her first book Joan Murray has learned something far more important than line breaks: the right stance toward her material and her audience.

The centerpiece of David Wojahn's *Mystery Train*[6] is the highly entertaining title sequence about moments in the history of rock 'n' roll. The Beatles in their pre-Ringo days, less skillful than they were to become, tour Germany; Elvis orders a cloud to move; Francis Ford Coppola, filming *Apocalypse Now* in the Philippines, hires an anthropologist to teach tribesmen to sing "Light My Fire." Almost anyone interested in rock—or in oddities and absurdities—should find much to enjoy in this sequence. Most of the poems are sonnets, although sometimes Wojahn's idea of rhyme or off-rhyme reduces to vaguely similar sounds toward the end of the words. Are "etc." and "flower" paired because "r" is the last consonant sound in each, or would Wojahn pronounce the words "et ceter-uh" and "flow-uh"?

Mystery Train finds Wojahn on the verge of becoming a very good poet. The forms he chooses usually suit his subjects and his abilities well; his sense of diction is ordinarily adequate to the task; the poems flow well, with sufficient syntactic and rhythmic variety; he has a particularly good sense of how to end a poem. The less successful poems have merely effective endings; the best poems conclude with a feeling of rightness and inevitability. He uses alternating long and short lines well, learned perhaps from Richard Howard.

Unusually for a poet discovered by Richard Hugo (as a Yale Younger Poet), he seems to be abandoning the self-presentational lyric for a poetry centered in narrative and dramatic monologue

[6] MYSTERY TRAIN, by *David Wojahn*. University of Pittsburgh Press. $17.95; $9.95p.

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(again, perhaps, the influence of Howard). Not surprisingly, the transition is not yet complete, although all the best poems in the collection have a narrative base. The self-presentational lyric in its present decadence normally begins with a trivial moment which the poet must then inflate with the currently acceptable rhetorical tricks at his command. A good narrative poem or monologue, on the other hand, begins by selecting a fable with greater than usual significance or interest. The customary rhetorical ploys are not only irrelevant but harmful. Thus, when Wojahn writes a monologue about a lesbian whose lover is severely injured in an accident, the rhetorical device of the repeated "I could tell you" is utterly unconvincing as imitated speech. The voice is never believably a woman's, and the potentially fascinating subject matter (what their life was like after the accident, the implied differences in class) goes undeveloped. Similarly, the would-be world-weary poseur of "The Recent Work" is rendered even less likeable by the use of the indefinite "you" rather than "I" or "he."

Indeed, Wojahn is precisely at his weakest when he most tries to be "tough." Compare the snide attitude toward Hubert Humphrey with the understanding presentation of Ritchie Valens tattooing "te amo" on his own hand. Even more directly, compare the portrait of Beach Boy Brian Wilson in decline, perilously close to *Schadenfreude*, with the less forced and more successful poems about Roy Orbison's comeback and about Bo Diddley in a New Jersey dive. Paradoxically, any poet who can write as well as Wojahn does can write even better. Here is the ending of one of the best poems in the book, about the murder of John Lennon as depicted in a wax museum:

> . . . . A pump in John's chest heaves
>
> To mimic death throes. The blood is made of latex.
> His glasses: broken on the plastic sidewalk.
>
> A scowling David Chapman, his arm outstretched,
> His pistol barrel spiraling fake smoke
>
> In a siren's red wash, completes the composition,
> And somewhere background music plays "Imagine"
>
> Before the tableau darkens. We push a button
> To renew the scream.
>
> The chest starts up again.

Sigodlin[7] marks a significant advance over Robert Morgan's last book, *At the Edge of the Orchard Country*, in two respects. First, Morgan

[7] SIGODLIN, by *Robert Morgan*. Wesleyan University Press. $20.00; $9.95.

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has tautened his verse with the use of a normative three-beat or four-beat line. His previous verse was not prolix, but could have been strengthened by eliminating a word here, a phrase there. Morgan has done just that. Second, he has enlarged his range. He was already one of our better pastoral poets. *Sigodlin*—a dialect word meaning crooked, uneven, or out of plumb; I knew it as "sigoglin"—also includes competent pastoral poems which seem very much of the period: "Baptizing Trough," say, or "Grandma's Bureau," another period title. Other poems with pastoral settings, like "The Body of Elisha Mitchell," strike more individual notes; no one who reads "Overalls," a comic gem, will ever look at a pair of overalls in quite the same way. Morgan's new book also contains a number of poems—"Inertia" and "Spirit Level," for instance, "Odometer" and "Rockpile"—which develop a metaphor from science or nature, often in the manner of middle-period Ammons. The best of these graceful poems are worthy to set beside Ammons. Not everyone will care for Morgan's taste in line breaks, but not everyone cares for Ammons', either. Morgan also shows he can tell a story ("Wedding Party," "The Road from Elmira") and create effective symbolic narrative ("The Way Back"). Morgan tends to work on a small scale, but his best poems hold up well on repeated readings.

The unappetizing title *Eight Longer Poems*[8] may dissuade bookstore browsers from investigating David R. Slavitt's fine new book—ironically, the shortest of 26 volumes submitted as candidates for review. Slavitt is a meditative poet who could accurately be described as a descendant of Auden, although he has also learned how to mix iambs and anapests from Stevens and how to use tonality from Bishop. The essayistic style of such late Auden poems as "Good-bye to the Mezzogiorno," "In Praise of Limestone," and "Nones" has been very influential in American poetry. Writing well in this style requires high intelligence, wide learning, and a considerable degree of technical skill and polish. Slavitt has all these qualities. The defects usually associated with this style include prosiness, facile wit, in-group insularity, and uneasiness about expressing emotion. Slavitt avoids the last two pitfalls and falls into prosiness only occasionally. Groan-provoking puns like "the rite stuff" are mainly confined to "Monster Dance"; punning works better in the wry context of "The History of My Ear."

Four of Slavitt's poems use domestic events as points of departure, while the other four begin by studying art and myth. The poet's grown son performs a "Monster Dance" each night at bedtime to reassure his own young son. The poet muses on his own nameless fears, how "We hit bottom and sit there, / secure, or that's what we think, but a trivial movement / disturbs the scree and begins an

[8] EIGHT LONGER POEMS, by *David R. Slavitt*. Louisiana State University Press. $14.95; $7.95.

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avalanche." "The History of My Ear" moves from a discussion of the poet's own partial deafness to a consideration of the connections between art, speech, and silence. "Cleaning" finds the poet "sacking—or trying to—a whole decade // of what I thought of as civilization." A scientist of the future might try to reconstruct our lives from these objects. In Poland "are whole / towns my aunts barely remember, gone / without a trace." "Grove Isle" is an extended description of a Florida scene, reminiscent of Bishop in setting, treatment, and skill, although harsher in tone and judgment.

Like most of the best poets who have learned from Auden, Slavitt writes well about art. "Gesualdo" studies the fascinating case of Carlo Gesualdo, Renaissance prince, murderer of his wife and her lover, composer of music which sounds modern even today. Slavitt offers Gesualdo as an existential figure ("The flesh and the nerves are empty / staves on which to prick out runs and trills, / lovely or ugly but striking"). Gesualdo's religious music makes "a crux that could not redeem a single soul." "The Wound" is a meditation on the myth of Telephus, whose wound could only be cured by the spear that made it. Slavitt impressively draws out the psychological implications of the myth until he slips into routine Freudian dogma in the final section. "Vlad," a sequence of short poems about Vlad the Impaler (Dracula), is less successful. The extended and irrelevant comparison with the myth of Antaeus gets the poem off to an awkward start. Still, "Vlad" has its moments, like the conclusion:

> . . . he has a sleazy glamor some fall for.
> What girl of any spirit resists the lure
> of art? The warning carved above his portal
> is rather obscured by ivy—and they'd ignore it,
> so eager to be lovely always, immortal
> as a poem is or a picture. Scrupulous, Vlad
> warns it's bloodless and poor.

"The Gate of Horn," a sequence of meditations based on Calderón's play *Life Is a Dream*, surpasses its model, Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*. The sequence is thought-provoking and witty, yet also reveals a middle-aged man's comprehension of human suffering. Slavitt understands how "decades / you've simply endured are those / that, very soon afterwards, you / speak of remorsefully" and how the action of the play (and of life itself?) ends "with the balanced blocking on stage / a disaster got up to look like / a denouement." "Basilio's Address from the Throne" is one of the best political poems written by an American, never narcissistic or self-congratulatory. *Eight Longer Poems* is the most satisfying individual volume of the quarter, and the one to which I shall return most often. Slavitt has all the tools necessary to write major poetry.

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CLARENCE BROWN

Anna Akhmatova

1. Who was she?

IF MARILYN MONROE SUMMED US UP AT ONE PERIOD of our lives, gathering into her blond vulnerability all our warmest delusions and dreams, marrying now a hero of the national game, now the greatest of our playwrights, it was Anna Andreevna Akhmatova who stood for the Russians.[1] Stood out, stood up for them, stood fast—but simply stood for them, posed in her statuesque way for all that was noble, generous, gifted, intelligent, stubborn, brave and above all wise in one of the great nations of the earth. She embodied that core of nationhood, the shared language, which is what distinguishes a people from the miscellaneous citizens of a common polity. Unions, dynasties, constitutions, federations of all kinds—these are paper boats floating on top of the wide and deep and infinitely perdurable river of the language. If Churchill and Roosevelt stiffened the national spines of their people with orotund wartime rhetoric, it was the voice of Akhmatova—her actual voice, carried over the radio to her fellow Leningraders during the siege, and her magnified voice in thrilling martial poems—that Russians heard during the blackest hours of their modern history: a little touch of Anna in the night.

Her awareness of being a "tribune of the people"—if one might attempt to civilize one of the pomposities now being expunged from the lexicon—stretches all the way from an early epigram, in which she bemoaned having taught female poets to speak and now longed to shut them up, to the prologue of her smuggled *Requiem*, in which a woman standing behind her in a petitioners' line outside a prison during the depth of the Yezhov Terror in the 1930s asked her whether she could find words for their anguish. She said she could, and did.

Akhmatova's personal ascendancy, her regal presence, was such that reactions to it can easily be overdone. I feel myself in danger of this now. One can soon become sated by too many pictures of the queenly profile, the hooded eyes, the figure that is always alone and composed and drop-dead elegant in the midst of a group who are busily arranging their features for the camera, as though anyone

[1] THE COMPLETE POEMS OF ANNA AKHMATOVA (2 vols.), trans. by *Judith Hemschemeyer*. Edited and with an Introduction by *Roberta Reeder*. Zephyr Press. $85.00.

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would notice them with Akhmatova in the same frame. We are too accustomed to our own pervasive hype, tailored images, adroitly mythologized personalities. But she was not a *celebrity*. She was the walking embodiment of what Russians thought best about themselves, the unsullied center, the truth of their being, the thing worth defending.

2. Why suppress a personal recollection?

I am not by nature or training a hand-kisser, but there seemed literally nothing else to do with the hand that was extended to me at our first meeting in 1962 at her dacha in Komarovo. No one knew then that the sick atmosphere was to be called "stagnation," but that is a nice name for the circumstances that made it a crime for a foreigner to be in a sandy country retreat that had once belonged to Finland. She hurriedly withdrew the hand, looked about apprehensively to determine whether we had been seen, and took me at once inside. I might have been Adam's housecat, but I had a letter from Artur Lourié, the composer, an old love of hers and now my fellow townsman and close friend in Princeton. Once inside, she asked me, "Do you know what happened to Mirsky?" I said we'd assumed that he perished but didn't know how. "They drowned him," she said. A large piece of plaster fell from the wall and shattered on the floor behind me. She smiled wearily. A silent witness to our meeting was Nadezhda Mandelstam, concealed behind a screen. I was to meet her only four years later, by which time I had published some of my research and had more reliable bona fides than the mere word of Lourié. One shook Nadezhda's hand.

3. Can she be read in a foreign language?

Akhmatova is probably one of those poets who are transportable without being translatable. I suspect that Cavafy is another, though I don't know Modern Greek, but certainly the great master of Akhmatova, Alexander Pushkin, belongs among them. Auden said that he could detect touches of Cavafy in his own work, and this in spite of the fact that he could read him only in English; he concluded that something—he called it tone of voice—was most certainly getting through the barrier of language.

She is transportable not so much because the tone of her voice carries as because the matter of her lyrics is for the most part the matter of fiction and drama. Her great friend Osip Mandelstam, in one of the most perceptive insights ever achieved into her work, declared that her origins lay in prose, in the Russian realism of the nineteenth century, and not in its poetry. And good English or

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French or German prose is just as serviceable as Russian for conveying the wisps of narrative, the sequestered encounters in dim restaurants or on country roads, the charged dialogue, half heard and half imagined, the oysters on the plate, the glove put confusedly on the wrong hand to convey a woman's emotional disarray, and all the other myriad of properties and people and actions that more commonly crowd the stage and the paragraph than the lyric.

But Akhmatova did not entirely derive from the Russian novel, for she told her stories not in prose but in verse—rhymed, formal, balanced—with a Russian intonation as individual as a fingerprint. The outward simplicity of this verse is no less striking than the psychological complexity of her plots, but simplicity in verse of the first order—Pushkin himself is here the supreme example—is a greater obstacle to translation than any other. It is like Nabokov's favorite sort of chess problem, the one with a feasible solution that a moderately clever person will eventually find, and choose, and thus foreclose forever his chance of discovering the *real* solution, the hidden poetry of the problem.

Like all strongly narrative poets, Akhmatova has a kind of immediate accessibility to those who must read her in translation. Of all the great Russian poets of this century, she is undoubtedly the most available in a foreign linguistic garb. Were it not for his novel and the simple ruminative poems attributed to its hero, Pasternak would be utterly unknown to more than a handful of readers. It is very likely that Mandelstam's extraordinary fate and the noble and tragic testimony of Nadezhda have had more to do with his international acclaim than any actual acquaintance with his difficult poems. Blok is little more than a rumor; Mayakovsky's actual greatness hasn't a chance against the clown prince persona; and the great poet Annensky, to whom all the others looked up with reverence, is not even a name.

But Akhmatova's poems, while diminished to be sure, do not vanish altogether when read as though they had been written in prose. They are typically fragments of some ongoing drama. The personae change, and the circumstances, and the moods, of course, but all of her people live in what is a recognizable verbal and spiritual space, the large though strictly finite plenum of her personal history, and her personal culture, and her associations. The unidentified speaker of the lyrics is usually a woman, naturally, though there are poems spoken by a male voice (and the difference in Russian is so palpably there in the linguistic forms that any attempt to conceal the gender of the "I" requires a degree of deviousness and circumspection that produces the effect of strain). And the addressee is often specifically identifiable as a man, though it is most often the usual anonymous reader—you and I. The poet's Muse is frequently around and is treated with the ironic and sometimes awkward familiarity reserved for the slightly disgraceful relative, who must nevertheless be acknowledged. Actual acquaintances are often named in dedicatory

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lines or in epigraphs or easily discernible through allusions of all kinds. There is a Bloomsburyish feel to the social milieu: the world consists of people with whom one was once in love, or is now, or would like to be; of people one knew at school; of friends introduced by friends. There is a complete absence of outsiders, of the people Noel Coward referred to as "civilians." Among Russians of her time this exclusivity was taken as the typically Petersburg note, and Akhmatova, Russian to the core of her being, was more purely representative of this slightly alien type than even the Jewish Mandelstam.

4. *Les grandeurs et misères de la Guerre Froide*

As a book, both as a physical and as a scholarly object, this is a fine late example of cold war publishing. It is amateurish to a degree, but it is inspired amateurism. One senses a fierce love of the words between its covers. It is necessarily amateurish, because it is published *in partibus infidelium*, not at home in Russia, where it ought to have been published but, under conditions only now beginning to evaporate, could not be published. The history of cold war publishing, when it is possible to write it, will disclose monstrosities of such incompetence and love. At a time when it would have been ludicrous to ask monies from the Congress to publish, in Russian, poems by Pasternak, Gumilev, and Mandelstam,[2] support for this noble venture from the fifties through the seventies appears to have come from the CIA, who did not have to account for their expenses nor be convinced that publishing the Russians' best writers to the infinite annoyance of the poisonous toads in the Kremlin would win some very distinguished hearts and minds. Until the advent of Ardis, the extraordinary publishing house founded in Ann Arbor by Carl and Ellendea Proffer, the sometime world headquarters of free Russian literature was probably in Langley, Virginia.

But the books thus published, having to answer to no scholarly authority higher than that of the actual compilers themselves, and certainly not to the market, were, like the present volumes, a very mixed bag. Along with the incalculable boon of Russian texts that had been impounded or distorted at home, one got a mishmash of clumsy error, ideology posing as information, bibliographical chaos, rumor declared to be fact, and, to top it all, uncertain scholarship and a generally deplorable level of taste in everything from typography to literary judgment.

The volumes under discussion here are externally handsome and sturdy objects, and they bring together virtually all the poems ever

[2] "Yes, Senator Helms, we are talking about poetry. Yes, sir, in the Russian language. No, Senator Thurmond, the amount recovered through sales will be extremely negligible . . ."

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written by Akhmatova in texts that can, for the most part, be relied upon.[3] The right-hand pages, the English translations, are in a clear and readable type and pleasingly uncrowded on the page. The poems are numbered by a system deriving *both* from the largest Soviet edition, that in the Biblioteka poèta series, *and* from Akhmatova's *Collected Works* as published in Munich in the mid-sixties (one of the aforementioned cultural, because clandestine, enterprises of the U.S. Government), but Russian originals have simply been reproduced by photocopy from various earlier sources, which results in a salad of Cyrillic fonts tossed on the same page and even within the same poem. This is undoubtedly preferable to the myriad of misprints that would surely have resulted from resetting the poems, but it is visually graceless and does not contribute to a general sense of being in the hands of professionals.

5. How is the translation?

First generalities, then a few specifics. The translation is a long labor of self-sacrificing love, and thus has about it an indelible moral purity that it would be swinish to disprize. Judith Hemschemeyer, the author of several volumes of poetry, is said to have learned Russian for the sake of translating Akhmatova (though native speakers provided her with interlinear versions, not always accurate, of each poem) and her English is for the most part a reliable indicator of the prose content of the left-hand pages, an enormous boon to the Russianless reader who wishes to gain some notion of Akhmatova's spiritual world and the narrative content of her poems. Readers with a moderate though imperfect command of Russian will welcome the English as trots, a perfectly reasonable aim for conscientious translation, according to Nabokov. The translations are not mannered or self-important or eccentric; they are decent and plausible English statements of the verbal content of the Russian. I ought to say that they have been admired extravagantly. In a review of these volumes in the *Los Angeles Times*, Richard Eder declares that if he did not know English already he would undertake to learn it if only to read Hemschemeyer's Akhmatova. I conceive it possible that some might be inspired by Hemschemeyer's versions to follow her splendid project of learning Russian in order to read Akhmatova's Akhmatova.

Specifics. Having read the best I can say for the right-hand pages, the seasoned fan of translation reviews will now expect me to trash them, but I shall have to disappoint him. I have turned in my badge to the International Translation Police, that grim brotherhood of

[3] There are almost too copious notes in which the editors explain the steps leading to their textual decisions, some of them more than dubious, but the discussion of this belongs in the specialist journals.

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enforcers, each with his exclusive orthodoxy. If I now cite in some detail a negative example, it is partly to establish the bona fides of actually having done the work expected of me, partly to make an important point about the allusive nature of Akhmatova's art, and thus the feasibility of translating it, and partly because, with the best will in the world, I can find no single line, let alone any complete English version, that impresses me as high poetic art, as in any sense other than the flatly informational an artistic relative of the original.

A poem in her first book, *The White Flock*, begins, in Hemschemeyer's English, *A dark-skinned youth wandered along these allées.* [p.215] Ignore French *allée* for a word that simply means a path in a park; the item in question here is *dark-skinned.* This translates the Russian adjective *smugly*[4] and immediately identifies the youth as Alexander Pushkin, Russia's greatest writer, some of whose forebears were black Africans and whose appearance, in the literally hundreds of contemporary representations of him, varies between extremely and slightly Negroid. It is a word that refers to human skin that is attractively melanic; Tsvetaeva uses it for a Crimean suntan. It is one of the handful of word-symbols indispensable to Akhmatova, who could no more have written without it than Wallace Stevens without, say, "reality" or "imagination." It is altogether thinkable that the *white* in the title of her first book functions largely in contrast to and might have been suggested by *smugly.*

But the point is that whenever it occurs in her work, it is a reference to Pushkin, and to his dual and antithetic ikonic significance: the supreme artist of the Russian language, the most unassailably okay of national poets, and at the same time the rebellious, infinitely non-Russian, sexual brigand that Pushkin also was: his simultaneous whiteness and darkness. It is no exaggeration to say that of all modern Russian poets, none so closely or so fruitfully identified with Pushkin as Akhmatova. She spent her childhood years in the very locale of Pushkin's early life, Tsarskoe Selo, an idyllic garden of a village near Leningrad. I once heard Anna Andreevna hold a roomful of intellectuals enthralled for a couple of hours by a vastly learned monologue on Pushkin, whose life and works she knew as though they were her own. Articles on Pushkin that she wrote at moments when she had to assume the protective coloration of scholar are still obligatory reading for graduate students.

She knew the whiteness and darkness as her own. "Nun and whore" is the epithet that Stalin's henchman Zhdanov flung at Akhmatova in an infamous speech in 1946, when, her wartime service over, she was relegated once more to oblivion. But Zhdanov did not invent the phrase; he cribbed it from one of the most distinguished of Russian

[4] One regrets the absurd appearance of this word in transliteration, but it no more reminds native speakers of *smug* or *ugly* than the French word for *seal* reminds Parisians of *fuck.*

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critics, Boris Eichenbaum, whose context (he was an adulator of Akhmatova) removed all scurrility from it. Considered dispassionately, it is, like Stalin's tag for writers ("engineers of human souls"), unarguably right, spoilt only by the diction and the dirty intent behind its most notorious occurrence. Akhmatova in life was both regal and earthy. She could turn the nose blue on anyone who presumed to breach the etiquette of her queenly presence, but, after a quantity of vodka that might stun a stevedore, she could also turn the air blue.

Smugly in Akhmatova's Russian is always *smugly*. In Hemschemeyer's English it is *dark-skinned* on p.215, *tawny* on 377, *dusky* on 385 . . . and so on. The whole range of approximate synonymy might have been exhausted, though I cannot testify to this. At any rate, with the disintegration of this essential word-symbol Pushkin has been lost, and with him one vast dimension of the cultural and personal resonance of Akhmatova's poetry. One is here confronted with the essence of what it means to translate the *work* of a writer rather than isolated words. Any reasonably agile periphrast could defend *tawny, dusky* and so on as feasible alternative English glosses for the Russian word, but such translation is uninformed by any appreciation for the meaning of *that single word and no other* in the poetic economy of Akhmatova's Russian. If baseball is a game of inches, poetry is a game of words. Single words can weigh tons, but they float away to nothingness in approximate translation.

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DAVID MASON

Achilles in the No Man's Land

ON FIRST LOOKING INTO THIS EXPENSIVE new edition of the *Iliad*,[1] most readers will wonder whether it is as good as Robert Fitzgerald's translation, which set a contemporary standard in 1974. Fitzgerald was particularly attuned to Homer's world. It was he who wrote, in his "Notes on a Distant Prospect,"

> I was no more than eight or nine when it had come home to me that the fate of the breathing person was to be hurt and then annihilated.

But Fitzgerald, who had given us a great *Odyssey*, fell short of the mark in translating the *Iliad*. He missed that poem's savage grandeur, its unalloyed bitterness at human mortality. When in Book Eighteen Achilles cries out despairingly, Fitzgerald lends his cry a possibility—however distant—of melioration: "Ai! let strife and rancor / perish from the lives of gods and men. . . ." Achilles is about to explode in violence greater than any we have seen so far in a relentlessly violent poem, but Fitzgerald's version sweetens the bitterness. The new translation by Robert Fagles, on the other hand, responds directly to what is lacking in Fitzgerald. From its very first word—"Rage"—this is a grittier, more fiery version. In the Fagles translation of Book Eighteen, Achilles cries, "If only strife could die from the lives of gods and men," and that reformulation—if only strife *could* die—carries a darker assessment of human nature. The strength of Fagles' translation lies not only in its narrative drive and the power of its best passages, but in its conception, the strongly interpretive line it takes on the meaning of the whole poem. In its almost unmitigated violence, Fagles' version, more than any other I have read, speaks to the bloody history of our century.

Judging a new translation from Homeric Greek is no easy task, especially in an era when few read the language of the original. We can study what Alexander Pope and Matthew Arnold said about Homer's sound. We can wistfully admire the effect of Homer's line on George Seferis, who called it "a vibrating chord," but most of us find this aural paradise inaccessible. Though I have a working knowledge of Modern Greek, I cannot inhabit the archaic language with any

[1] THE ILIAD, trans. by *Robert Fagles*. Introduction and notes by *Bernard Knox*. Viking. $35.00.

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feeling of naturalness, and must defer to the studies and reviews of classicists like D. S. Carne-Ross and Rufus Bellamy.

As a rule, though, translation succeeds only if it is to some degree disloyal. Each translation strives, or ought to strive, to be a living work in its own language. It is also an attempted solution to a set of problems, and in the case of Homer one of the problems is what to do about the line. In any narrative poem, the relationship between the story and the line, where enjambment can be used for both both lyric and dramatic effects, is crucial. This is why no prose translation can represent a great epic poem. The best translators of Homer have all, to my knowledge, been themselves accomplished poets. Pope's *Iliad* is astonishingly confident and readable; his couplets often seem less intrusive than you might expect. Here, for example, is his graceful opening:

> Achilles' Wrath, to Greece the direful Spring
> Of Woes unnumber'd, heav'nly Goddess, sing!
> That Wrath which hurl'd to *Pluto's* gloomy Reign
> The souls of mighty Chiefs untimely slain;
> Whose Limbs unbury'd on the naked Shore
> Devouring Dogs and hungry Vultures tore.
> Since Great *Achilles* and *Atrides* strove,
> Such was the Sov'reign Doom, and such the Will of *Jove*.

Though his last line has six stresses, Pope makes no attempt to match the unrhymed hexameters of Homer, but chooses a naturalized English line in its Augustan form. (Richmond Lattimore's 1951 translation fails in part because of its line—a wooden hexameter—and its literal-minded diction, whereas Christopher Logue's fragmented versions in *War Music* often seem too campy.) Like Pope, Robert Fitzgerald chose pentameter, but he worked it into supple and various blank verse:

> Anger be now your song, immortal one,
> Akhilleus' anger, doomed and ruinous,
> that caused the Akhaians loss on bitter loss
> and crowded brave souls into the undergloom,
> leaving so many dead men—carrion
> for dogs and birds; and the will of Zeus was done.

This is beautiful work, making good use of fluid vowels, and it has an economy typical of Fitzgerald's best passages. If Homer's line is, as commentators say, both fixed and various, then Pope and Fitzgerald have found useful English equivalents.

Robert Fagles makes an altogether different choice. His basic line is hexameter, but he avoids the deadly rigidity of Lattimore and develops a flexible prosody which nevertheless maintains its formal identity:

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> Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles,
> murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless
> losses,
> hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy
> souls,
> great fighters' souls, but made their bodies carrion,
> feasts for the dogs and birds,
> and the will of Zeus was moving toward its end.

Seven- and six-beat lines establish a loose pattern (the last line is pentameter, which is also used frequently in the text), and Fagles adopts the blank verse variation of Shakespeare and Milton when he pulls back to trimeter. His six opening lines are more unruly than Fitzgerald's, but also more muscular. His "Rage" has more force than Fitzgerald's "Anger" or Pope's "Wrath." He even does a better job of distinguishing the souls of the fighters, the life-breath that will be robbed from so many of them, from the carrion their bodies will become.

Fagles is careful to pay homage to Fitzgerald in his preface, and at times Fitzgerald's version remains the superior one; his rendering of Trojan grief at the end of Book Twenty-Two, for example, is more economical than Fagles'. But Fitzgerald is often too elegant, choosing a Latinate word where Fagles will choose an Anglo-Saxon one, and in consequence his *Iliad* touches its spilled blood with greater delicacy. Fagles plunges both fists into the gore; he mucks about in it. In Book Ten he makes the vacated battlefield so gruesome that he reminds me of *All Quiet on the Western Front.* When the Achaeans extract a confession from Dolon, a Trojan spy, and Odysseus stands back while pitiless Diomedes beheads their prisoner, Fagles writes,

> . . . Diomedes struck him square across the neck—
> a flashing hack of the sword—both tendons snapped
> and the shrieking head went tumbling in the dust.

Fitzgerald's version of the same passage is comparatively passive: "In the dust / the head of the still crying man was muffled."

Men die more horribly in the new translation. Guts uncoil and spill; brains splatter inside helmets. The deaths themselves are the same—as are Homer's famous similes when killing is compared to a harvest or a fisherman gaffing his catch—but Fagles' diction more often carries the awful sounds of hacking, screaming and clawing the earth. Homer is so inventive when it comes to fatal wounds (Agamemnon slashes off one man's arms, lops off his head, and sends him "rolling through the carnage like a log") that one can imagine an audience laughing grimly as each new death surpasses the last. But when we expect the killing to stop and it doesn't, when the lists of

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dead read like a ghoulish parody of Biblical begats, the horror is overwhelming, as it is certainly meant to be.

Fagles is more likely than most other translators to use modern historical diction, referring at one point to "Trojan shock troops"; the battlefield becomes a "no man's land" where fallible heroes prepare for "Total war." Even wise old Nestor exults in the slaughter: "Now's the time for killing! Later, at leisure, / strip the corpses up and down the plain!" All of this Fagles reproduces extremely well. When Achilles insults Agamemnon in Book Nine, Fagles relishes the invective and indulges in a violent pun about Briseis—"enjoy her to the hilt!"—that Fitzgerald does not give us.

Because of Fagles' talent for bitter language, one might expect him to do less well with the lyrical set pieces which leaven the poem's horror, but even in many of these he writes beautifully. When, near the end of Book Seven, the dead of both sides are cremated, Fitzgerald buries the lovely passage within a long column of verse, but Fagles gives it a moving stanza of its own:

> Just as the sun began to strike the plowlands,
> rising out of the deep calm flow of the Ocean River
> to climb the vaulting sky, the opposing armies met.
> And hard it was to recognize each man, each body,
> with clear water they washed the clotted blood away
> and lifted them onto wagons, weeping warm tears.
> Priam forbade his people to wail aloud. In silence
> they piled the corpses on the pyre, their hearts
> breaking,
> burned them down to ash and returned to sacred Troy.
> And just so on the other side Achaean men-at-arms
> piled the corpses on the pyre, their hearts breaking,
> burned them down to ash and returned to the hollow
> ships.

These lines are simple and powerful (Fitzgerald misses the opportunity to make the Achaean ships "hollow"). The tragic tone of the *Iliad* derives from our knowledge that all joys are brief, and no one, not even Achilles, escapes death. Men strive for honor and glory (and Helen, too, becomes sympathetic in her self-knowledge), but death in Homer's world is utterly unconsoling. The *Iliad* gives us figures who are desperately alive; they cling to what pleasures they have or can recall because death is a nothingness, an absence—annihilation.

At times Fagles' line slackens too much, and in a few passages, such as the death of Asius in Book Thirteen, a proliferation of pronouns makes it difficult to tell who is butchering whom. If Fagles really intends to transform Homer's Greek into a modern English poem, he ought to be able to solve these problems (Pope is the only translator I have read who renders the death of Asius with complete clarity).

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Some readers may also object to Fagles' use of Greek proper names in their old Latinized spellings. Fitzgerald created phonetic transliterations, giving his text an Hellenic look and sound, but he also complicated reading for anyone who cannot imagine what that sound might be like. Fagles has found a workable compromise, though it constantly reminds us of our distance from the original language.

These are small complaints to raise about so mammoth an endeavor. Though Fagles has published numerous translations and an interesting book of his own poems based on the words and paintings of Van Gogh, these accomplishments don't prepare you for the poetic successes of his *Iliad*. In addition, the book at hand is handsomely bound and printed, with some helpful notes and a thorough, eloquent introduction by Bernard Knox (its several maps would have been more useful, I think, printed on a single fold-out page).

At its best, Fagles' translation convinces me that I had not previously understood the richness and contemporary value of the poem. I am struck once again by Homer's psychological complexity: heroes sob and shrink; Hector's son, Astyanax, screams at the sight of his father fresh from battle; Nestor longs for his youthful prowess, then wonders if it wasn't all a dream; Achilles fumes, first in hurt pride (". . . that man has no intention of quenching his rage," Odysseus says), then in hopeless grief; a grieving Priam lashes out at his surviving sons; Achilles and Priam weep together, two mortal enemies bound in a precarious moment of sympathy, and on the next page Achilles nearly loses patience with the old man. No wonder the god Apollo is perplexed by human behavior:

> ". . . this Achilles—first he slaughters Hector,
> he rips away the noble prince's life
> then lashes him to his chariot, drags him round
> his beloved comrade's tomb. But why, I ask you?
> What good will it do him? What honor will he gain?
> Let that man beware, or great and glorious as he is,
> we mighty gods will wheel on him in anger—look,
> he outrages the senseless clay in all his fury!"

The gods have already wheeled on Achilles. He knows full well that he is doomed, and chooses to die speedily. The fickleness of the gods only dramatizes inscrutable nature, and their occasional pity may be nothing more than humanity's wishful reading of their absence.

Where we stand on the *Iliad* has much to do with where we stand on hope or hopelessness. If we believe in the possibility of permanent world peace, we are likely to find this epic outworn and overlong. But if we believe that strife is in our natures, that we are doomed to struggle against each other and ourselves, the *Iliad* will speak to us like nothing else.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

JOSEPH EPSTEIN's book of familiar essays *A Line Out for a Walk* will be published in April by W. W. Norton; the same firm will bring out a collection of his stories, *The Goldin Boys*, in October. . . . LOUIS SIMPSON's most recent books are *Selected Prose* and *In the Room We Share*, a collection of poems. Both are published by Paragon House. . . . DEAN ALBARELLI recently received a grant for fiction writing from the Vermont Council on the Arts. . . . ROBERT McDOWELL is the author of *Quiet Money* (Henry Holt). He has recently edited *Poetry After Modernism*, an anthology of essays on contemporary poetry. . . . The University Press of Kentucky has just published Wendell Berry's book *Harlan Hubbard: Life and Work*, a biography of the writer and painter.

JOHN LOUGHERY teaches English at the Columbia Grammar and Preparatory School in New York City. . . . TOM WILHELMUS co-directs the Ropewalk Writers' Retreat. . . . ROBERT PHILLIPS' second collection of short stories, *Public Landing Revisited*, will be published this year by Story Line Press. He is recipient of an Award in Literature from the American Academy & Institute of Arts and Letters. . . . JAMES FINN COTTER has been named president of the International Hopkins Association. . . . EMILY GROSHOLZ reports that "Life goes on as usual." . . . DAVID DOOLEY's first book of poems is *The Volcano Inside* (Story Line Press). . . . CLARENCE BROWN is Professor of Comparative Literature at Princeton. His *Mandelstam* won the Phi Beta Kappa's Christian Gauss Award for Literary Criticism. . . . DAVID MASON teaches at Moorhead State University in Minnesota. He has recently been named the co-winner of the 1991 Nicholas Roerich Poetry Prize.

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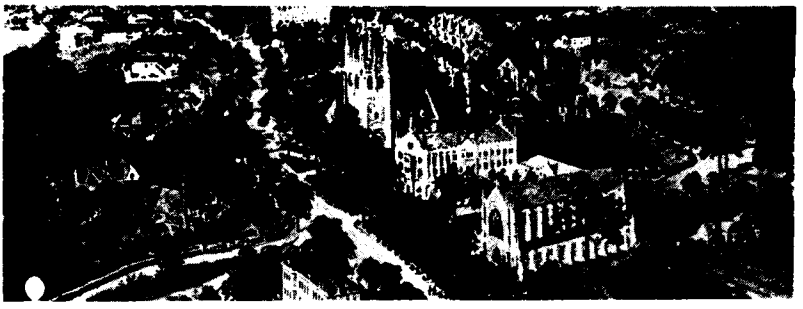

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IN THIS ISSUE:

The notion of a multiplicity of points of view was from the start more than a bit disingenuous. What was actually wanted all along was a multiplicity of left-wing points of view. It is only in the strange land of university humanities departments that Marxism—so heinous in dealing with people, so happy in dealing with texts—continues to find proponents. But then the university culture has never been known to let itself be put off or otherwise inconvenienced by reality. Nor put out by hypocrisy.

—Joseph Epstein,
"The Academic Zoo: Theory—in Practice," p. 9.

Every now and then a magazine editor thinks that it's time for an article on "contemporary poetry" and someone is foolish enough to write it. Poetry, he tells us, is in a very bad way in the United States. Why? Because only a few hundred people will buy a book of poems, whereas in 1810 *The Lady of the Lake* was immensely popular. Or else he tells us that poetry is flourishing because there are lots of poetry readings.

These people aren't talking about poetry but something else. They would like poetry to be like the ANNUAL FAMILY PICNIC. Burgers. Hotdogs. Salads. Watermelon. They see poets competing in the Biathlon, 3-Leg, and Water Balloon. Prizes will be given, and AFTER there will be Music and Dancing.

—Louis Simpson,
"Love in the West and Other Memoirs," p. 31.

"Tell me," I say, turning a page of the newspaper, "that wouldn't have been Father Martin I saw driving off with the lovely widow Crouse?"

She releases a breathy sound that's half sigh and half laugh. "I guess your brother's a very hip priest," she says. "Jeans, a turtleneck, and a pretty woman—I don't know. I bet his parishioners would never stand for that."

—Dean Albarelli, "Flames," p. 55.

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